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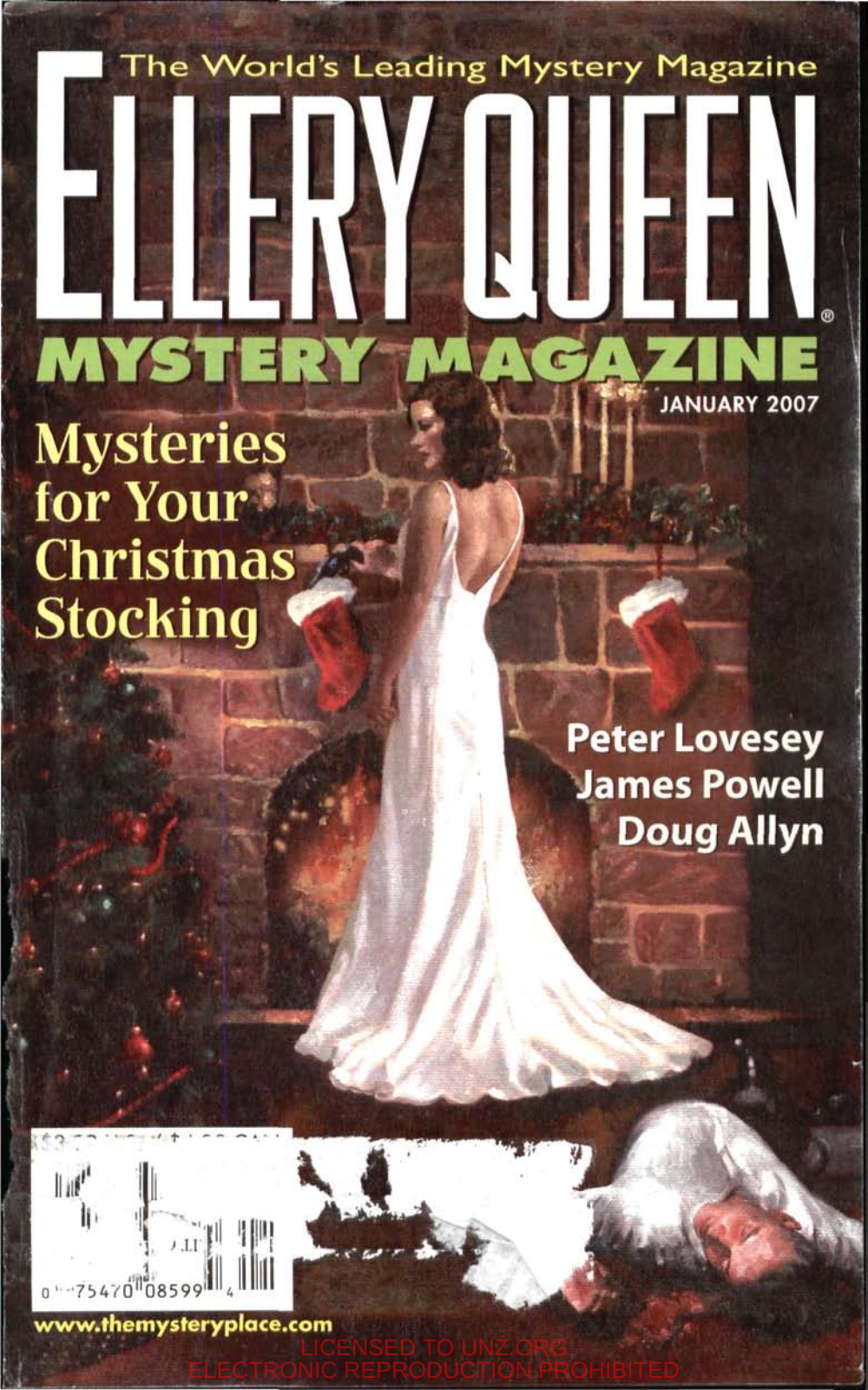

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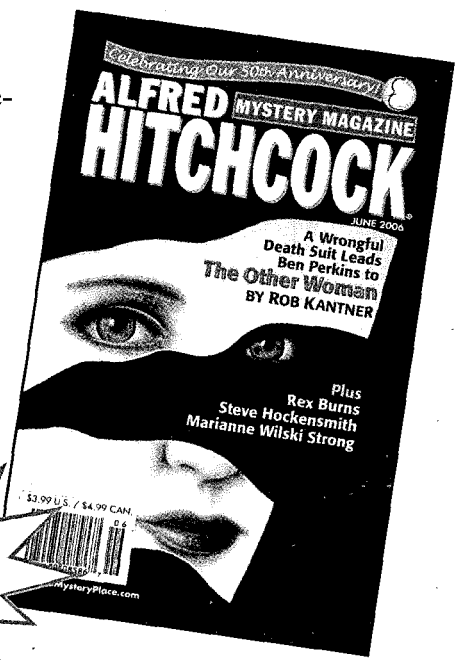

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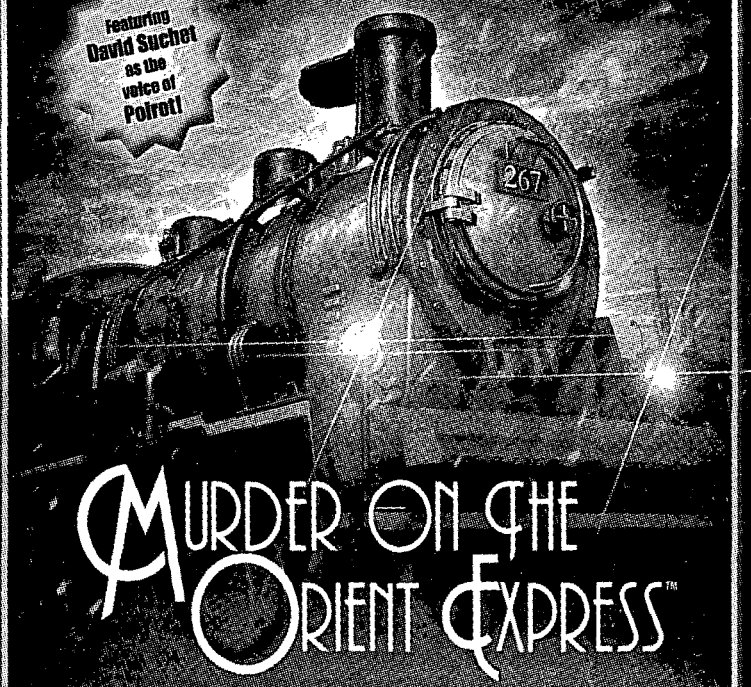

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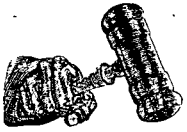

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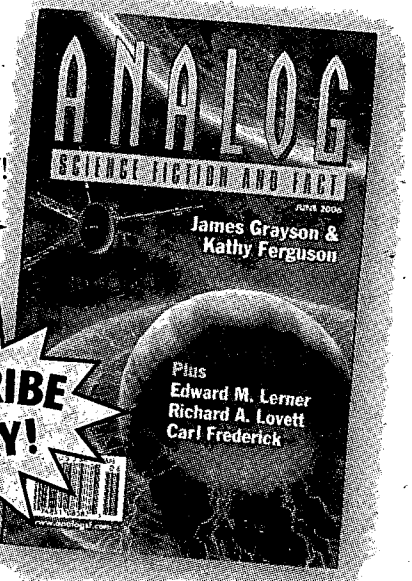

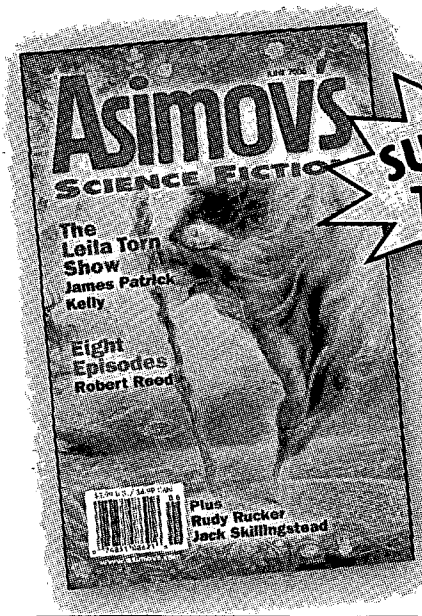

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THE CASE OF THE DEAD WAIT

by Peter Lovesey

1.

A Christmas at home wasn't ever in Laura Thyme's plans. Where was home? She'd hurled a large stone through the front window of her last one. Her two-timing cradle-snatcher of a husband Nick had blighted all the nice memories of that place. She tried to think of herself these days as a free spirit. *Tried,* because deep inside she hadn't entirely got the man out of her system. He still had the capacity to hurt.

Well, she was sure of one thing. She wouldn't dump herself on either of her grown-up children. They would have plans of their own, and quite right, too. If Matthew or Helena looked forward to pulling anything on Christmas Day it wasn't a cracker with their mum. They really were free spirits, long past the stage when Laura made it her business to know who they were sleeping with.

As for Rosemary—her gardening oppo, Dr. Rosemary Boxer, the

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ex-academic with the happy knack of finding wealthy clients with ailing plants—she'd be the perfect company for a festive lunch, but she had an elderly mum living alone. Last weekend Rosemary had called to wish Laura a merrier time than she was expecting for herself.

The result: Laura was housesitting.

She was alone in The Withers, a large Jacobean house in Wiltshire. Two of her oldest and richest friends, Jane and Michael Eadington, were having three weeks in the Canaries. A call at the end of November had set it up. "We're in such trouble, Laura. You know we've got these silly orchids that are Mike's latest hobby? Our daughter Maeve—the model—was going to look after them and now she's got a chance to do a series of shows with Calvin Klein in New York. Could you, would you, *will* you, please, be our fairy godmother?"

Sorted.

Even after discovering that the house had another resident—Wilbur, the rescue greyhound.

She'd driven the Land Rover down there on Christmas Eve. For all its mechanical uncertainties, the ancient 4x4 was ideal transport for the country. She overheated only once, and the car didn't overheat at all. She was just in time to see the Eadingtons off. A quick introduction to the orchids, six trays of them in the conservatory under banks of fluorescent tubing. Hurried instructions about the central heating, persuading Wilbur to wear a coat for winter walks, and what to do in a power failure. Firm orders not to be in the least concerned if anything broke or went wrong. "It's all replaceable, darling. We're just so pleased to have you here. Treat it like your own home. Raid the freezer, watch the DVDs, drink the wine in the cellar, have an orgy if you want."

For a few minutes after they'd driven up the lane Laura wondered if she'd done the right thing. The house seemed bigger than she remembered from the last visit. She'd never once set foot upstairs. The orchids were in flower, but didn't look pleased at being handed over to her care. Winter was supposed to be the flowering season, but some of them were wilting. Mike had talked about misting and humidity levels and feeding. She didn't want

The Rosemary and Thyme series, to which this new Peter Lovesey story belongs, has been adapted for TV in the U.K., with Felicity Kendal and Pam Ferris in the starring roles. In its first successful season, the show drew in seven million viewers with each episode. (It's available in the U.S. on DVD.) Fans of Peter Lovesey's other popular series, the Peter Diamond mysteries, won't want to miss two new titles from Soho: *The Circle* and *The Secret Hangman.*

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any casualties. She returned to the vast space the Eadingtons used as the living room.

A sudden movement at the window gave her a wicked shock. The greyhound had emerged from behind the curtain, where he'd been sitting on the sill. Yes, a greyhound on a window sill. It was that kind of room, that kind of window, that kind of curtain. "I'm in charge now, Wilbur," she told him, wagging a finger, "and if the two of us are going to survive you'd better not play any more tricks like that."

Treat the place like your home, they'd said, so she took out her Christmas cards and started setting them up. The cards triggered mixed feelings. It was good to hear from old friends, but it could hurt when the envelopes came addressed to Nick and Laura with messages along the lines of "How are you two getting along? Give us a call and let's all meet up in 2007."

Wilbur jumped back on his sill and knocked down most of the cards.

"Making some kind of point, are we?" Laura said. But she moved them to the grand piano.

When the doorbell rang a moment later, the rest of the cards dropped out of her hand. It was a chiming bell and her charming friends had set it to the opening bar of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," which can be pretty startling when you don't expect it. Wilbur barked, so she had to shut him in the conservatory first.

A tall—six foot tall, at least—thin-faced woman with deep-set, accusing eyes was on the doorstep with a plate covered with a cloth. "And who the devil are you?" she said.

Laura did her best to explain, but it didn't make much impact.

"Where's young Maeve? She ought to be looking after the house," the woman said.

"Yes, but she's dashed off to New York. A last-minute change of plans."

"What do I do with these, then? I made them for the family." She lifted the cloth briefly to reveal a batch of underdone mince pies.

"I don't know," Laura said; adding with tact, "They smell delicious. I'm sorry, but you didn't say who you are."

"Gertrude Appleton from next-door. We always exchange mince pies at Yuletide. Have you made yours?"

"I just arrived."

That didn't count with Gertrude Appleton. She clicked her tongue and looked ready to stamp her foot as well. "I must have one of yours, or I'll get bad luck for a year."

"Why?"

"It's Wiltshire custom, isn't it? You eat a pie on each of the twelve days of Christmas, and every one has to be baked by a different friend. Then, if the Lord is merciful, you'll survive to see another Christmas. Bless my soul, there isn't anyone else I can ask."

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"You'd better step inside a moment," Laura said, not wanting to panic this woman and playing for time while she thought about ways to resolve the problem.

"No, I won't come in," Gertrude Appleton said, and those fierce eyes were suddenly red at the edges and starting to water. "I don't know you from Adam. Couldn't call thee a friend."

"Let's be friends. Why not? It's the season for it," Laura said, dredging deep to sound convivial. "Listen, Gertrude, why don't I do some baking right now and make some pies for you?"

"But you won't have mincemeat."

"I'm positive all the ingredients must be in the kitchen. Jane adores cooking, as you know."

Gertrude raised her chin in a self-righteous way. "Mine was made with the puddings four weeks ago, the week after Stir-up Sunday."

"Stirrup what?"

"Stir-up Sunday. Haven't you heard of that? The last Sunday before Advent. That's when you make your puddings and mince, after the collect for the day: 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy people.'"

This was getting more and more weird.

"In that case, Jane may have made hers already," Laura said. "I'll check. One way or another, you'll get a mince pie from me, Gertrude. Depend upon it."

"Take these, then." Gertrude thrust the plate towards her. "You'll need some for the waits."

Laura had a mental picture of old-fashioned kitchen scales, with her mince pie being weighed against Gertrude's and found wanting.

"The carollers. They come round every Christmas Eve, and they always want a bite to eat and mulled wine, too, the boozy lot. I must be off. I have seasonal jobs to do. There's greenfly and aphids in the greenhouse."

"You're a gardener?" Laura said with interest.

"Ha!" She tossed her head. "Am I a gardener? I wouldn't bother to go on without my garden. It's the saving of me."

"I do some gardening, too. What are you going to do about the aphids—spray them?"

Gertrude looked shocked. "I don't hold with chemicals. No, I'll smoke the varmints out, like I always do."

"Fumigation? Effective, I expect, though I've never tried it," Laura said.

"I've got these magical smoke things, like little strips of brown paper. Had them for years. Just close up all the windows and seal the cracks and set light to they strips. Let it blaze for a while, and then I stamp it out so they can smoulder. Soon as the smoke appears I'm out of there quicker than hell would scorch a feather

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and shut the door behind me. When I go in again, there's not a greenfly left to say it ever happened."

Laura refrained from mentioning that the magical smoke things undoubtedly contained chemicals of some kind. "Good luck with it, then. And I won't forget the mince pies. Which direction do you live?"

She was glad to have a task, although she could think of better ones than this. After closing the door she carried the plate to Jane's enormous kitchen, plonked it on the table, and checked the walk-in larder for jars of mincemeat.

No joy. If you were planning to spend Christmas in Lanzarote, she reflected, you wouldn't feel obliged to make mincemeat. Even on Stir-up Sunday.

She checked the freezer. Well stocked, but not with seasonal items.

She thought of the supermarket in Bradford on Avon. A bought mince pie wouldn't suffice, of course. Those eyes like calculators would spot a Mr. Kipling at fifty paces. The pastry, at the very least, would have to look homemade.

Then Laura had her inspiration. She'd save herself the toil, tears, and sweat by recycling some of Gertrude's own mince pies and simply making new lids for them. She picked a sharp knife and prised the lid off one. A neat dissection. The trick would be to spread a little jam over the mincemeat to seal the replacement.

She found all the ingredients she needed and switched on the oven.

When the phone on the wall rang she was up to her elbows in flour.

"You'll just have to leave a message after the tone," she said to it.

"This is Calvin Klein's office in New York. Mr Klein was hoping to speak to Maeve about the trip. We'll call back."

Laura said, "Calvin Klein! I could be speaking to Calvin Klein and I'm sifting ruddy pastry?"

She was adding the egg yolk and water when the phone went again. This time she grabbed it with a floury hand. In a come-hitherish tone she said, "Hi, how can I be of service?"

"Laura?"

She knew that voice and it wasn't Calvin Klein's. "You! I thought you were someone else. Oh, never mind. It's good to hear from you."

"It's a miracle," Rosemary said. "I used one of those directory-enquiry numbers and I'm sure it was someone in Calcutta, but she seemed to know the Eadingtons. You're installed in deepest Wilts, then?"

"'In deepest' sums it up. I haven't been here an hour and I'm already making pastry for the locals. What's with you?"

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"A change of plans, actually. Mother forgot to tell me. When I got here she was all packed up to leave. You know she does competitions? She won a trip for two to the Bahamas, courtesy of Cadbury, or Kellogg's, or someone."

"How marvellous! But what are you going to wear? I bet you didn't pack your bikini."

"Oh, she isn't taking me," Rosemary said, as if that went without saying. "You know what Mother's like. She's taking some old gent called Mr. Pinkerton from the Tai Chi group. I'm high and dry, Laura. I was wondering if—well—if there's a spare bed in this stately pile you're looking after."

Laura took a step back and there was a yelp from Wilbur, who had got too close. "That wasn't me. Do I have a spare bed? Dozens. That's brilliant."

"I could get a train to Bath tonight."

"You've made my Christmas. I'll be waiting on the platform."

She had fitted the fresh lids on those pies, twelve of them, and very appetizing they looked. She'd used a beaten-egg glaze that gave them a lovely amber finish to leave no doubt that they were different from Gertrude Appleton's insipid-looking offerings. Rosemary was due on a late train at 10:50, so it was likely that the carollers would get their treats. Would eleven pies be enough? She needed to put one aside, of course, for Gertrude, to help her survival plan. If twelve or more carollers came, Laura told herself, it was a sure bet that some wouldn't want another pie if they'd been eating them all around the village. The mulled wine simmering in a saucepan was another matter.

About eight-thirty, Wilbur howled and Laura heard muted singing. She shut Wilbur in the kitchen and opened the front door. She needn't have worried about the catering. A mere four men stood under a lantern. Three wore cardboard-and-tinsel crowns and were giving an uneven rendering of "We Three Kings." The fourth, holding up the lantern, was the vicar, unless his collar was from a carnival shop, like the crowns. He looked too young to be a clergyman. Just like policemen, Laura thought.

When they started on the solo verses, Melchior's reedy voice almost faded away. For a fat man he was producing a very thin sound. Caspar, with "Frankincense to offer have I," was marginally better, and Balthazar, "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume," lost the tune altogether. She was thankful when they got to the last chorus. She popped a two-pound coin into the box and invited them inside.

"Muddy feet," said the vicar. "We'd better not."

Melchior had already taken a step forward and needed restraining by his companions. Too much mulled wine already, Laura suspected. But she still fetched the tray from the kitchen with the jug

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of wine and the pies.

"I may have over-catered here. I was expecting more of you," she said as she invited them to help themselves. The man who'd sung the part of Caspar handed round the plate of mince pies, but it was obvious that they'd eaten well already. Only Melchior took one. The wine was more popular.

"We would have had two shepherds as well," Balthazar said, "but one didn't show up and the other dropped out at Long Farm."

"It's quite a trek," the vicar said.

"He was legless," Balthazar said.

"You don't live here, do you?" Caspar asked Laura. "You're not a burglar, by any chance?"

"Giving us mulled wine and the finest mince pie I've had all night? You must be joking," Melchior said to his friend.

A slightly dodgy mince pie, Laura almost confessed. They seemed likable men, even if their singing wasn't up to much. She introduced herself and explained about the housesitting. They told her their names but she soon forgot them. They were the vicar and Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar tonight, and she'd probably never see them again, so why think of them as anything else?

"What do you do when you're not housesitting?" the tuneless one, Balthazar, asked.

"Gardening, mainly."

"So do I. Not a lot of gardening to be done this time of year," little Caspar said.

"You're wrong about that," Laura said. "There are no end of jobs. I'll be out there tomorrow."

"Cutting some holly and mistletoe?" the vicar said.

"Good suggestion. The house could do with some, as you see."

"Christmas roses? You've got some in the front."

"If you mean the *Helleborus niger,* they're not such good specimens. The ones you buy in florists come so much taller and whiter, thanks to forcing," Laura said, thinking Rosemary would have been proud of that bit of expertise.

"Nasty things. Poisonous," Melchior said, slurring his words even more.

"Mistletoe berries are poisonous, too," Balthazar said.

The vicar decided not to go down that route. "We'd better drink up, gentlemen. Three more houses and a long walk to go."

"Have you been to Gertrude Appleton?" Laura asked.

"The house afore you. Stingy old mucker," Melchior said.

"That's a bit unseasonal, isn't it?" the vicar said.

"We all know Gertrude," Caspar said. "Before we get a glass or a bite to eat from her, we have to promise to take *her* a mince pie after Christmas."

"And if we forget, she'll come hammering on our doors," Balthazar said.

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Laura was about to explain that it was a superstition, but stopped herself. These villagers didn't miss a thing. They'd know all about Gertrude.

"Thanks for these, good lady," Caspar said as he returned the plate, with ten of the eleven pies remaining. "Sorry we couldn't all do justice to them."

Melchior said without warning, "I need to sit down. I'm feeling dizzy."

"You'd better come in," Laura offered. "I was wondering about you."

"And it's not the wine," said Balthazar. "He's a teetotaler."

Laura gave Balthazar a second look, but he seemed to be speaking in all seriousness. She noticed Melchior didn't have a glass in his hand.

"Would you mind, Mrs. Thyme?" the vicar said. "I don't think he's capable of continuing." He picked the crown off the fat man's head. "I'll have to be Melchior now." Judged by the speed of the change, he'd wanted a starring role all evening.

Laura took a grip on Melchior's arm and steered him inside to an armchair. Then she said something she was to regret. "Why don't you gentlemen finish your round and come back for him?"

"He farms just up the lane," Caspar said, and Laura thought she detected a suggestion that they might not, after all, return for their companion. "Blackberry Farm. It can't be more than three hundred yards."

They waved goodnight.

After closing the door, Laura glanced at her watch. There was still ample time before she needed to collect Rosemary.

Melchior had slumped in the chair and was snoring softly.

"Strong coffee for you," Laura said.

He made a sound she chose to take as appreciation. It could have been a belch.

In the kitchen, Wilbur was round her feet. She found the store of dog food and opened a tin. She said, "Consider yourself lucky, Wilbur. I've got other demands on my time."

When she took the coffee to Melchior his snoring was heavier and his chin was buried in his chest. This wasn't good. She didn't want this overweight man settling into a deep sleep and being immovable just when she needed to drive to Bath. She checked the time again. She really ought to be leaving in less than an hour. She wasn't certain how long it would take to drive to the station.

"Coffee?"

No response.

"Have some coffee. It'll brighten you up."

Wishful thinking. He didn't make a murmur that wasn't a snore.

In a louder voice she said, "I made the coffee."

This was becoming a predicament. She'd have to touch the

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man's face or hands to get a response, but she'd only just met him. Didn't even know his real name. *How do I get myself into situations like this?* she thought.

She put down the coffee and stood with her arms folded wondering how to deal with this. Wilbur came in and sniffed at the mud on Melchior's boots.

Fresh air, she decided. She flung open a couple of windows and an icy blast of December ripped through the room.

Wilbur streaked upstairs, but Melchior didn't move a muscle.

"Come on, man!" Laura said. She found the remote and switched on the television. The Nine Lessons and Carols at full volume. Switched the channel to the Three Tenors.

No result.

In frustration Laura brought her two hands together and slapped her own face quite hard. She'd have to overcome her innate decorum and give him a prod. Alone with a strange bloke in someone else's house, but it had to be done.

First she switched off the three of them belting out *Nessun Dorma.* Her nerves couldn't take it.

Tentatively she put out a finger and touched the back of Melchior's right hand, resting on the arm of the chair. It remained quite still. She placed the whole of her hand across it and squeezed.

There was a slight reaction, a twitch of the eyelids, but they didn't open. Laura leaned closer and blew on them. Nothing.

She drew a deep breath and patted his fat face.

He made a sound, no more than "Mm"—but a definite response.

"Wake up, please," she said. "I don't want you asleep."

A triumph. The eyes opened and stared at her.

"It's no good," she told him. "You can't sit here forever. Let's see if you can walk to the car and I'll drive you home. Blackberry Farm, isn't it?"

At the mention of his address, Melchior made a definite effort to move. He rocked forward and groaned. Laura thrust her hand under his armpit and encouraged the movement. Out of sheer determination she got him to his feet. He was still unsteady, but she wrapped his arm around her shoulders and hung on to it and kept him upright.

"The car's outside. Come on. Start walking."

It was slow progress and a huge physical effort, but she kept him on the move, talking all the time in the hope that it would keep him conscious. Getting down the two small steps at the front door was hard enough, but the real challenge was hoisting him onto the passenger seat of the Land Rover.

She swung the door open with her free hand. "I'm going to need your help here, Melchior. One giant leap for mankind."

He moaned a little, maybe at Laura's attempt to be cheerful.

To encourage him, she curled her hand under his knee and lifted

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his right leg up to the level of the vehicle floor. It felt horribly limp. She found places for his hands to grip. "On the count of three," she said, "and I'll probably end up with a slipped disc. One, two, three!"

If he made some gesture towards the performance it wasn't obvious. Laura found herself making a superhuman effort. Dignity abandoned, she put her shoulder under his rump and inched him upwards. All those hours of heavy gardening paid off. He got one buttock onto the seat and she rammed him like a front-row forward until he was in a position where she could snap the safety belt across.

She ran back to the house and closed the windows and door. Wilbur was inside, but did she have the key? She hoped so.

The Land Rover, bless its antiquated ignition system, started the first time.

Blackberry Farm. Which way? Her passenger was in no condition to say. Laura swung right and hoped. The lanes were unlit, of course. Her full beam probed the hedgerows ahead. Can't be more than three hundred yards, Caspar had said. She'd gone that distance already. She continued for another two minutes, then found a gate entrance. Nothing so helpful as a sign. She reversed into the space and retraced her route. Maybe she should have turned left coming out of The Withers.

Then she saw the board for Blackberry Farm fixed to a drystone wall. Drove into the yard and sounded the horn. She'd need help getting Melchior down. It would be useful if he had a couple of hefty sons.

From one of the farm buildings came a wisp of a woman wearing overalls and wellies. She was about Melchior's age, Laura judged. Two sheepdogs came with her, barking.

"I've brought the farmer home," Laura said, competing to be heard. "He's rather tired. Is there anyone who can help get him down?"

The little lady spread her hands. "There's only me, my love."

Laura got out and opened the passenger door. "We'll have to manage together, then. Is he your husband?"

"Yes, and I don't like the look of 'un," the little lady said. "Douglas, you gawpus, what's the matter with 'ee?"

Laura looked. Her passenger had taken a definite turn for the worse. He was making jerky movements with his head and left leg. Change of plan. "I think we should get your husband to a doctor fast," she said. "Jump aboard."

"I can't come with 'ee," the farmer's wife said. "I've got a cow in calf."

"But I'm a stranger here. I don't know where to take him," Laura almost wailed.

"Horse piddle."

"What?"

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"Royal United, Bath. Agzy-denton Emergissy."

Laura understood now. "Which way?"

"Left out of the yard and straight up the lane till you reach the A36. You'll pick up the horse piddle signs when you get close to the city."

"Can you call them and say I'm on the way with a man having convulsions?"

"After I've seen to the cow."

Laura swung the Land Rover towards the gate, scattering the dogs, and started up the lane. "Don't worry," she said to Melchior, or Douglas, "you'll be getting help very soon." The only response was a vomiting sound.

"Please! Not in the Land Rover," she muttered.

She was forced to concentrate on the drive, trusting in the Lord that she wouldn't meet anything as she belted along the lane. Passing points seemed to be unknown in this part of Wiltshire. The beam picked out the scampering shape of a badger up ahead. It saved itself by veering off to the left.

Then she spotted headlights descending a hill and guessed she was close to the main road. Right or left? She'd have to make a guess. Her instinct said right.

Forced to stop at the intersection, she glanced at her passenger. His face was still twitching and looked a dreadful colour in the passing lights. This was much more serious than overindulgence in mulled wine.

Now was when she could do with an emergency light and siren. Out on the A36, with a long run into Bath—and a sign told her she *had* taken the right direction—she was overtaking like some teenage joyrider in a stolen Merc. Other drivers flashed their lights at her and one idiot got competitive and tried to force her to stay in the wrong lane. But there came a point when she was high on the downs and the city lights appeared below her. At any other time she would have been enchanted by the view. All she could think was, where is the hospital?

At the first traffic lights she wound down the window and asked. Of course it had to be on the opposite side of the city. Another hair-raising burn-up through the streets and she found seriously helpful signs at last.

A&E. She drew up behind an ambulance. Someone was rolling a stretcher on wheels towards the Land Rover. The farmer's wife must have alerted them. The passenger door was opened.

"Is this the man with convulsions?"

Laura took this to be one of those inane questions people ask in times of crisis. Of course he had convulsions. He'd been convulsing all the way to the hospital.

But when she turned to look at him, he'd gone still.

They checked his heart. The doctor shook his head. They

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unstrapped Melchior and transferred him to the stretcher and raced it inside.

Nothing had been said to Laura. She could only conclude that she'd brought in a man who was dead. Maybe they'd revive him. She moved the Land Rover away from the entrance and went in to find out.

She was twenty minutes late collecting Rosemary. It was such a relief to see her.

"I'm so sorry."

"My dear, you look drained. Whatever has happened?"

Rosemary insisted on taking the wheel and Laura told her story as they headed out of the city.

"So couldn't they revive him?" Rosemary said.

"What's the phrase? Dead on arrival. They worked on him, but it was no use."

"What was it—heart?"

"No one would say. They'll do an autopsy, I suppose. I told them all I could. It seemed to happen very suddenly. He said he felt dizzy and asked to sit down. I thought it was the mulled wine, but it turned out he hadn't had a drop all evening. He's TT. Then he fell asleep, a really deep sleep. I got him into the car—I don't know how—he was pretty far gone—and his wife noticed the convulsions, which was when I knew he needed medical help."

"Dizziness, anaesthesia, and convulsions. Was he vomiting?"

"Trying to, anyway."

"It sounds more like poisoning to me," Rosemary said.

"Poisoning?"

"Did he eat anything?"

"One of the mince pies I handed out. That's all."

"That's all right, then," Rosemary said. "No problem with that, if you were the cook."

Laura clapped her hand to her mouth.

Rosemary said, "What's wrong?"

"I did something dreadful. I may have killed him."

"Hold on." Rosemary pulled into a layby and turned off the engine. "Laura, get a grip and tell me just what you're talking about."

Laura's voice shook as she explained what she had done with Gertrude Appleton's pies. "If there was anything in them I'll never forgive myself."

From a distant field came the triple bark of a dog-fox, answered by a vixen sounding eerily like a woman screaming. Rosemary shivered. "We'll face this together."

It was close to midnight when they drove up the lane to The Withers. Christmas morning, almost.

In an effort to lighten the mood, Rosemary said, "If you look in that bag at your feet you'll find I packed a bottle of bubbly. Let's

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open it as soon as we get in, shall we?"

"You're a star," Laura said. "Some Christmas cheer in spite of everything." But her voice trailed away.

A police car was on the drive.

"Is one of you ladies Mrs. Laura Thyme?" the officer asked. "You're about to see in Christmas at the police station."

2.

It was the day after Boxing Day, and still Laura was troubled by guilt.

"What upset me most was the way that detective put his hand on my head and pressed down when I got in their car, just like they do with murderers."

"That didn't mean a thing," Rosemary said.

"Well, he didn't do it to you." Laura's voice shook a little. "Is it possible those pies were poisoned?"

"Possible, I suppose."

"Think of what goes into mincemeat—all those rich flavours, the fruits, the spice, the peel. You could add almost any poison and it wouldn't be obvious."

"If they were poisoned, we've still got eleven of them sitting in the fridge."

"Ten. I handed the singers a plate with eleven and ten came back. The farmer took one and ate it. That's certain."

"There are eleven in the fridge. I counted," Rosemary said in her precise way.

Laura snapped her fingers. "You're right. I kept one back for Gertrude, the neighbour. She asked specially."

"Gertrude," said Rosemary. "She's the one the police should be questioning. I wonder if she'd eat that pie if you offered it. She wouldn't know it's one of hers with a new lid."

"I don't want another death on my hands."

"This is all supposition anyway," Rosemary said. "We'll probably find the poor man died of natural causes."

"Listen, if Gertrude is a poisoner, those pies were meant for my friends Jane, Michael, and Maeve. Was she in dispute with them? You know what neighbours can be like."

"Neighbourly, in most cases."

"What could she have used?"

"You said she's a gardener. You and I know that a garden is full of plants capable of poisoning people."

"Christmas roses!" Laura said. "We've got some in the front."

"Let's not leap to any conclusions," Rosemary said, trying to remain calm. "Besides, your carol singers had been round most of the village eating mince pies and drinking wine before they got to you. If he was poisoned, it could have been someone else's pie that did it."

Laura refused to think of anyone else except Gertrude as

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responsible. "I'd dearly like to know if she was having a feud with Jane and family."

"Why don't we ask someone?"

"In a village? Who do you ask?"

"The vicar. He ought to be discreet."

The vicarage was ten minutes away, at the end of a footpath across the frost-covered fields. If nothing else, they'd be exercising Wilbur the greyhound. With difficulty they got him into his coat.

They passed Gertrude's garden on the way. Laura grabbed Rosemary's arm. "Look, she's got a patch of Christmas roses."

"She's also got white bryony in her hedge and a poinsettia in her window, both of them potential killers, but it doesn't make her a murderer," Rosemary said to curb Laura's imagination. "She may have mistletoe inside the house. Death cap toadstools growing in her compost. I see she has a greenhouse. There could be an oleander in there."

But Laura was unstoppable. "I didn't tell you about the greenhouse. She told me she was fumigating it for pests, and I don't know what she was using, but it sounded primitive, and hazardous as well. Would you believe burning shreds of paper that she had to stamp on to produce the smoke?"

Rosemary winced. "Out of the ark, by the sound of it. Well, out of some dark shed. Old gardeners used flakes of nicotine. Highly dangerous, of course, and illegal now. What's wrong with a spray?"

Laura tapped the side of her nose. "Chemicals."

"Fumes are eco-friendly, are they? Isn't that the vicarage ahead?"

They shouted to Wilbur, who must have scented fox or rabbit. He raced back, tail going like a mainspring, and got no reward for obedience. He was put on the lead and no doubt decided it's a dog's life.

The vicarage was surrounded by a ten-foot yew hedge that Rosemary mentioned was another source of deadly poison. Laura gave her a long look. "You wouldn't be winding me up, would you?"

She smiled. "Encouraging a sense of proportion."

The vicar, in a Bath Rugby Club sweatshirt, was relaxing after his Christmas duties. He sounded genuinely disturbed about the death of Melchior, and guilt-stricken, also. "If I'd had any idea he was so ill, I wouldn't have asked you to take him in," he said to Laura. "You acted splendidly, getting him to hospital."

"I couldn't tell the police much about him," Laura said. "Didn't even know his surname."

"Boon. Douglas Boon. His family have farmed here for generations. Blackberry Farm is the last of the old farms. I suppose his wife inherits. There aren't any children. She'll have to sell up, I should think."

"What do you mean by the last of the old farms?"

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"Traditional. Cattle and sheep. Everyone's switching to flowers and bulbs since that foot-and-mouth epidemic. We didn't have an outbreak here, thank the Lord, but other farmers didn't want the risk and sold up. Much of the land has been put under glass by Ben Black, known to you as Balthazar."

"The tall man?" Laura said.

"A giant in the nursery garden business and a very astute businessman. Lay chairman of the Parochial Church Council as well, so I have to work closely with him. He's from London originally. To the locals, he's an incomer, but he gives them a living."

"So he'll be interested in Blackberry Farm if it comes on the market?" Rosemary said.

"No question." The vicar sighed. "I happen to know he made Douglas a handsome offer last week, far more than it's worth, and I heard that Douglas was willing at last to sell."

"Every man has his price," Laura remarked.

"Yes, and it is also said that gold goes in at any gate except the gate of heaven. As it turns out, Ben will get the farm for a fraction of that offer if Kitty Boon wants to sell." He looked wistful. "I'll be sorry if the cows go. They hold up the traffic when they're being driven along the lane for milking, but rows of daffodils wouldn't be the same at all."

Laura had a vision of rows of daffies holding up the traffic.

"Do you mind if I ask about someone else?" she said. "On Christmas Eve, Gertrude Appleton called with some mince pies."

"Gertrude?" The vicar had a special smile for this member of his flock. "That's one of her many superstitions. Something about exchanging pies to avoid bad luck. False worship, really. I don't approve, but we all indulge her because she's such a formidable lady."

"Harmless?"

"We have to hope so."

"Is she on good terms with my friends, Jane and Michael Eadington?"

"As far as I know."

"No boundary disputes? Complaints about the greyhound? Excessive noise?"

"I've never heard of any. Why do you ask?"

Rosemary said quickly, "It's a joke. Those pies she brought round aren't the most appetising."

The vicar smiled. "Now I understand. Did you try one?"

She shook her head. "It's the look of them, paler than Hamlet's father."

His eyes twinkled at that. "I'm afraid not one of the carollers could face one the other night."

"And will you indulge her, as you put it, and exchange mince pies?"

He smiled. "The annual batch of pies for Gertrude is one more

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parochial duty for me. I don't have a wife to cook for me, unfortunately."

"Your pies are delicious, I'm sure," Laura said, liking this young clergyman.

Rosemary said in her no-nonsense voice, "The third of the Three Kings was Caspar, right?"

"Little Colin Price the other night," the vicar said. "He's my tenor, at the other end of the scale from Ben Black."

"As a singer, do you mean?"

"I was thinking of his situation. Colin's up against it financially. He was a dairy farmer like Douglas, but less efficient. He lost a big contract with the Milk Marketing Board a couple of years ago and Douglas bought him out. He's reduced to work as a jobbing gardener these days."

Laura exchanged a wry smile with Rosemary. "There are worse ways to make a living."

"True. But I have to object when he does it on Sundays sometimes and misses Morning Service. Colin just smiles and quotes those lines, 'One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.' That isn't scripture, I tell him, it's a bit of doggerel."

The vicar came out to see them off and Rosemary admired the yew hedge and asked if he clipped it himself.

"Every twig," he said. "Can't afford a gardener on my stipend. Some people seem to have the idea that yew is slow-growing. From experience I can tell you that's a myth."

"What do you do with the clippings—burn them?"

"No, I bag them up and send them away to be used in cancer treatment."

"For the taxol in them," Rosemary said. "Very public-spirited."

"I must admit they pay me as well," the vicar said with a fleeting smile at Laura.

Their return across the frost-white fields was spoiled by a blue police light snaking through the lanes. Laura said, "I just *know* it's going to stop at The Withers."

She was right.

When they got there the inspector was looking smug. "You might be thinking the forensics lab was closed over Christmas, but I happen to know one scientist who is a perfect Scrooge, can't stand the parties and the eating and only too grateful to earn double overtime. It's bad news for you, I'm afraid, Mrs. Thyme. The late Douglas Boon was poisoned. My scientist found significant amounts of taxin in his body."

"Toxin?" Laura said.

"Taxin. It comes from the yew," Rosemary murmured. "Just like taxol, only this is no help to anyone, not to be taken in any form."

"You're well informed," the inspector said.

"I'm a plant biologist."

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"And Mrs. Thyme? Are you also an expert?"

"Only an amateur," Laura said.

About as amateur as a million-pound-a-week footballer, if the inspector's look was anything to go by. "I've got a warrant to search this house."

"Here? What are you looking for?" Rosemary asked.

"We know from the stomach contents that the last food Mr. Boon ingested was a mince pie. In your statement of Christmas Eve, Mrs. Thyme, you admitted administering a pie to the deceased."

"Administering?" said Rosemary. "She handed round a plate of pies, that's all."

"And we'd like to have them examined, if they aren't already destroyed."

This was a defining moment for Laura. Should she confess to changing the lids on Gertrude's pies? She glanced towards Rosemary, who nodded back. "Inspector," she said, "there's something I ought to tell you, something I didn't mention last time."

The inspector raised both hands as if a wall was about to collapse. "Don't say another word. I'm going to issue an official caution and you're going to accompany me to the police station."

"Oh, what nonsense," Rosemary said. "The pies were made by someone else, and that's all there is to it."

"Don't put ideas in her head, Miss Boxer. She's in enough trouble already."

As Laura got into the police car, Wilbur whimpered. The hand pressing down on the back of Laura's head felt like an executioner's this time. They kept her waiting more than an hour while the house was searched. The plate of mince pies, wrapped now in a polythene evidence bag, was carried from the kitchen in triumph.

Rosemary watched in silence, sickened and infuriated by this turn of events. She could see Laura's troubled face through the rear window of the patrol car as they drove away. She thought about following in the Land Rover, and then decided they wouldn't let her near the interview room. She'd be more useful finding out precisely what had been going on in this sinister village.

By asking around, she tracked Colin Price (the little man Laura knew as Caspar) to the garden behind the village hall. He was up a ladder pruning a huge rambler rose. The clippings were going into a trailer he'd wheeled across the lawn.

"What's that—an albertine?" Rosemary asked, seeing how the new shoots sprouted from well up the old stems.

"Spot on."

"Late pruning, then?"

"It's a matter of getting round to these jobs," he said. "I can only do so much. It's mostly grass-cutting through the summer and well into autumn. Other jobs have to wait."

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She introduced herself and mentioned that she was Laura Thyme's friend. "Laura had the unpleasant job of driving poor Mr. Boon to hospital on Christmas Eve. You met her earlier, of course."

"That's correct," he said. "And now she's been picked up by the police, I hear."

"Word travels fast," Rosemary said.

"Fields have eyes, and woods have ears, as the saying goes." He got down from his ladder. "But all of us can see a police car with the light flashing. What do you want to ask me?"

"It's about the man who died, Douglas Boon. Could anyone have predicted that he'd take one of the mince pies my friend offered round?"

He shrugged. "Doug liked his food. Everyone knew that. I've rarely seen him let a plate of pies go by."

"So he had one at every house that evening?"

"Every one except Miss Appleton's."

"Gertrude's? Was there a reason for that?"

A slow smile. "Have you met the lady?"

"No."

"Have you sampled her cooking?"

"No."

"If you had, you'd understand." He closed the pruning shears in a way that punctuated the remark.

She said, "I thought you all exchanged pies with her."

"We do, but we don't have to eat them. My wife always makes a batch and I prefer hers any day."

Rosemary ventured into even more uncertain territory. "Did Douglas have any enemies around here?"

He mused on that for a moment. "None that I heard of."

"His dairy farm was the last in the village, I heard. What will happen to it now?"

"Kitty isn't capable of running it alone. Likely it'll be bought for peanuts by Ben Black and turned into another nursery. That's the trend."

"Sad to see the old farms disappearing," Rosemary said. "It happened to yours, I was told."

"Bad management on my part," Colin said without hesitation. "I've no one to blame but myself. Doug acquired the herd and my three fields."

"Would you buy them back if they came on the market?"

"I'm in no position to. Ben is the only winner here."

She asked where Ben was to be found.

"This time of day? I wouldn't know. Last I saw of him was yesterday morning."

She decided instead to call on the village Lucretia Borgia.

The cottage could have done with some new thatching, but otherwise it looked well maintained. Gertrude Appleton must have

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seen Rosemary coming because the door opened before she reached it.

Tall, certainly. She had to dip her head to look out of her door.

And she was holding a meat cleaver.

"What brings you here?" she asked Rosemary. The eyes fitted Laura's description of them as about as sympathetic as wet pebbles.

"I'm staying next-door."

"You think I don't know that? What do you want?"

A little Christmas cheer wouldn't come amiss, Rosemary thought. "My friend Laura has been taken to the police station for questioning about the death of Mr. Boon."

"So?"

"So she can't keep her promise to bring you a mince pie. We had some left, but the police have seized them."

Those cheerless eyes widened a little. "She baked me a pie?"

Rosemary sidestepped that one. "She was saying it mattered to you, something about good luck for next year."

Gertrude's face lightened up and she lowered the cleaver to her side. "Did she really?"

"She said you generously made her a present of some pies of your own, and advised her that the carol singers were coming round."

Abruptly, the whole look reverted to deep hostility. "Was it one of my pies she fed to Douglas Boon?"

"I believe it was."

"And now they're saying he were poisoned? Are you accusing me?" Suddenly the cleaver was in front of her chest again.

Rosemary swayed out of range. "Absolutely not."

"You said the police seized some pies. Were any of mine among them?"

"Actually, yes."

Gertrude took in a sharp breath. "I've made pies for twenty years and more, and never a whisper of discontent."

"So we've got to find out how some taxin—that's from a yew bush or a tree, the seeds, the foliage, or the stems—found its way into that pie, which apparently killed him."

"One of mine? How could it?"

"Can you remember making the mincemeat? Did anyone come by while you were mixing the fruit?"

"Not a living soul."

"Could anyone have interfered with it since?"

"Impossible. This isn't open house to strangers, I'll have you know. No one crosses my threshold."

That much Rosemary was willing to believe. "You don't have a yew bush in your garden, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't. It's the tree of death. It kills horses, cattle, more animals than any other plant."

"Yes, but this was deliberate. Human deaths from taxin are rare.

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Someone added seeds of yew, or some part of it, to the mincemeat Douglas Boon consumed on Christmas Eve. Don't you see, Gertrude? We've got to discover how this happened. I'm certain Laura is innocent."

"They'll pin this on me," she said. "That's what they'll do, and everyone in the village will say the old witch deserves it."

"Will you do something for Laura's sake? For your own sake?" Rosemary said. "Will you think about everything connected with the making of the mincemeat? The chopping of the fruit, the source of all the ingredients, sultanas, currants, raisins, peel, nuts—whatever went into it. Go over it in your mind. Did anyone else contribute anything?"

"No."

"Please take time to think it over."

Gertrude sniffed, stepped back, and closed the door.

Late that afternoon, Wilbur's barking brought Rosemary to the front door before Laura emerged from the police car that returned her to The Withers.

"What a relief," Rosemary said. "Have they finished with you?"

"I wouldn't count on it," Laura said as she scratched behind Wilbur's ears. He'd given her a delightful, if slobbery, welcome.

Over a fortifying cup of tea, she told her tale. She had been interviewed three times and kept in a room that wasn't quite a cell, but felt like one. She'd told the detectives everything she knew and provided a written statement. "I'm sure they would have charged me with murder if it wasn't for Gertrude's pies. They had them analysed and got the results back this afternoon."

"Poisoned?"

"No." Laura smiled. "They were harmless, all of them."

Rosemary pressed her fingers to her lips. "I find that hard to believe."

"So did the inspector. You should have seen his face when he told me I was free to leave."

"That's amazing. Gertrude is innocent."

"And so am I." Laura glanced across the room. "What's he eating? Wilbur, what have you got in your mouth? No, Wilbur, no!" She dashed across and forced open the dog's jaws. A small piece of mincemeat fell into her palm. "Rosemary, look. There are crumbs on the carpet. I think he's had a mince pie."

Rosemary was already at her side fingering the pastry crumbs. "It can't have come from inside the house. The police spent over an hour searching the place."

"The garden, then," Laura said. "He must have found it in the garden."

They went to the front door. "Let him show us," Rosemary said. "Find it, Wilbur. Good dog."

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Wilbur knew what was wanted. He went straight to a lavender bush and lifted it with his nose. A brownish conical thing was exposed.

"A death cap," Rosemary said.

"Do you mind?" Laura said. "That's pastry. That's one of my lids." She picked it up and turned it over. "How on earth did this get here?"

The question hung in the air unanswered. Wilbur's cooperation could only go so far.

"Should we get him to a vet?" Laura said.

"Let's give him water first."

Rosemary filled his bowl and brought it to him. He lapped it obediently.

"He doesn't seem to be suffering," Laura said. "The onset was rapid with Douglas Boon."

"Taxin is one of the quickest of all the plant poisons," Rosemary said. "I doubt if we'd get him to a vet in time."

"He looks all right."

Wilbur licked her hand and wagged his tail.

"I think he wants some more."

An hour later, he was still all right.

Rosemary and Laura allowed themselves the luxury of fresh tea. They didn't get to drink it because Wilbur unexpectedly barked several times and ran to the door. Someone was outside holding a flashlight.

Laura looked out. The evening had drawn in and she had difficulty seeing who it was.

The voice was familiar. "You'd better call the police," Gertrude Appleton said. "I've gone and killed another man."

3.

"This can't be true," Laura said. "You're in the clear. Your pies were analysed today and there's nothing toxic in them."

With a stare like the condemned woman in a silent movie, Gertrude said, "Follow me," and started towards the gate.

Laura looked at Rosemary. They'd been in dangerous situations before. Rosemary shrugged. At least Gertrude wasn't wielding that cleaver. They went after her.

She paused at her garden gate and turned the flashlight beam on Rosemary and Laura to check that they were behind her. Then she led them to her greenhouse and unlocked the door.

The place would have been creepy even in daylight, with a huge overhanging vine that still had some of its leaves, brown and contorted. Other skeletal plants in pots had been brought in for the winter. Gertrude edged around a raised flower bed in the centre and directed the flashlight at a dark shape on the floor.

A man's body.

"I killed him," Gertrude said with a stricken sigh. "I never

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looked here when I smoked out the pests on Christmas Eve. I just put down the stuff and set light to it."

"He is dead, I suppose?" Laura said.

Rosemary leaned over for a closer look. "Well dead, I would say."

Gertrude was still reliving the experience. "I made sure it was smouldering and got out, locking the door behind me. Opened it an hour ago and found him. I can only suppose he was drunk and crept in here to sleep it off." She paused. "Will I go to prison?"

"Let me have the flashlight," Laura said. She edged past Gertrude for a closer inspection. "I can't say I know him intimately, but isn't this one of the carol singers, the tall one, Balthazar?"

"Ben Black? It is!" Gertrude said in despair. "God forgive me. What have I done?"

"Unless I've got my facts muddled, you haven't done anything at all," Laura said. "You fumigated on Christmas Eve after visiting me, am I right?"

Gertrude nodded.

"That was in the afternoon? You locked the door and didn't open up until today? You left the key in the lock?"

Another nod from Gertrude.

"Think about it," Laura said. "Ben was alive and singing carols that same evening. He couldn't have been trapped in here. See, there's dried blood on the back of his scalp. It looks as if someone hit him over the head and dumped the body in here. Yes, we will call the police, but I don't think you're in any trouble."

Over cocoa that night, with the dog asleep in front of a real log fire, Rosemary summed up the case. "What we have are two impossible crimes. One man poisoned by a harmless mince pie and another bludgeoned to death in a locked greenhouse."

"The second crime isn't impossible," Laura said. "The key was in the door. Obviously the killer could get in and out. They put the body in there and locked it again thinking it might not be found for some time."

"They?"

"Could be a man or a woman. That's all I mean."

"Then are we agreed that there's only one killer?" Rosemary said.

"Let's hope so."

"So why was Ben Black bumped off?"

"Because he knew something about the first crime?"

"Very likely. And why did the first crime take place?"

"The death of Douglas Boon? It could have been a mistake," Laura said. "Maybe he ate a poisoned pie intended for Ben Black."

"I don't think so," Rosemary said. "Remember, Douglas was a gannet. He was guaranteed to take any pie that was offered except one of Gertrude's."

"Hers were on the heavy side," Laura recalled.

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"So if we assume Douglas's death was planned and carried out in cold blood, what did Ben find out that meant he had to be murdered as well?"

"It's got to be something to do with the mince pie Wilbur found under the lavender bush," Laura said.

"Another harmless pie?"

They were silent for some time, staring into the flames. "Do you think that young vicar is all he seems?" Rosemary said.

Laura frowned. "I rather like him."

"A bad sign, usually," Rosemary said. "Let's go and see him tomorrow."

"Won't the police say we're interfering?"

"They're going to be ages getting to the truth, if they ever do. For them it's all about analysing DNA evidence, and we know how long that takes. A good old-fashioned face-to-face gets a quicker result."

Overnight it snowed and they both slept late.

"It's the total silence, I think," Laura said. "I always get a marvellous sleep when there's a snowfall."

"Whatever it is," Rosemary said, "I've had a few ideas about these deaths and I'd like to try them out on you."

After breakfast they put on wellies and took Wilbur for his longest walk yet. He was more frisky than ever, bounding through the snow regardless of that mince pie the day before. People might spurn Gertrude's cooking, but this hound had thrived on it. Along the way, they kept a lookout for yew trees, and counted five in and around the village, and three yew hedges. Over a pre-lunch drink in a quiet corner of the pub, Rosemary unfolded her theory to Laura and it made perfect sense. They knew from experience that theories are all very well, but the proof can be more elusive. They decided to go looking for it late in the afternoon.

"Are we clear about what each of us does?" Rosemary said.

"All too clear," Laura said. "You get the inside job while I wait out here with Wilbur and freeze."

"He'll be fine. He loves the snow and he's got his coat on. Just stroll around as if you're exercising him."

They had parked outside the village church.

Rosemary went in and found the vicar slotting hymn numbers into the frame above the pulpit.

"Busy, I see."

He almost dropped the numbers. "You startled me. I have a choir practice shortly."

"I know. We had a walk this morning, and I saw the church notice board."

"We meet earlier when the schools are on holiday."

"A smaller choir now."

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"Sadly, yes. Plenty of trebles and altos, but only one tenor remaining. I'm going to miss Ben and Douglas dreadfully."

"Would you mind if I stay and listen?"

He looked uneasy. "I don't know what sort of voice they'll be in after Christmas. There's always a feeling of anticlimax."

"If it's inconvenient, Vicar, I'll go." She watched this challenge him. He was supposed to welcome visitors to his church.

After a moment, he said, "Stay, by all means. But I must go and turn up the heating. I don't insist they wear vestments for practice, but I don't like to see them in coats and scarves."

"Of course."

Little boys started arriving, standing around the vestry on the north side, chattering about their Christmas presents. The choir stalls gradually filled. Two women choristers appeared from the vestry and so did Colin Price. He recognised Rosemary and smiled.

The practice was due at four. Some were looking at their watches. It was already ten past. The organist played a few bars and stopped. Everyone was in place except the vicar.

There was a certain amount of coughing. Then, unexpectedly, raised voices from the direction of the vestry. The vicar was saying, "Outrageous. I can't believe you would be so brazen."

A female voice said, "I'll be as brazen as I like. I've got what I came for and now it's up to the police." It was Laura.

"We'll see about that," the vicar said.

"Get your hands off me," Laura said.

Rosemary got up from the pew where she was sitting and walked quickly around the pulpit to the vestry. The door was open. Inside, the vicar was grappling with Laura, pressing her against the hanging coats and scarves.

Rosemary snatched up a brass candlestick and raised it high.

Over the vicar's shoulder Laura said, "No, Rosemary!"

Distracted, the vicar turned his head and Laura seized her chance and shoved him away. He fell into a stack of kneelers.

He shouted to Rosemary, "Don't help her. She's a thief. I caught her going through people's clothes."

Laura said, "You were right, Rosemary. There were pastry crumbs in his pocket. Oh, get out of my way, Vicar. I'm going to make a citizen's arrest."

She dodged past him and ran into the main part of the church in time to see a small figure making an exit through the west door.

Rosemary, some yards behind her, called out, "Laura, that man is dangerous."

"So am I when roused," Laura said.

She dashed up the aisle and out of the church to the car park. There, the runaway, Colin Price, was standing by his pickup truck. But he'd shied away from the door because a dog was baring its teeth in the driver's seat.

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"Wilbur, you're a hero," Laura said when she'd recovered enough breath. Before going in to search the vestry, she'd noticed the door of the pickup was unlocked, so she'd installed Wilbur in the cab as a backup.

Colin wasn't going to risk opening that door and he knew he wouldn't get far through the snow on foot. He raised both hands in an act of surrender.

To the delight of the choirboys, the practice was abandoned, and they were sent home. In the warmth of the vestry, Colin seemed not just willing to talk, but eager. "I've been an idiot. I should never have killed twice. It was meant to turn out differently."

"Why kill at all?" the vicar said. He'd dusted down his clothes and was a dignified figure again.

"I hated Douglas Boon," Colin said. "We were rivals in the old days, both of us dairy farmers, but he was so damned successful and I was failing on the paperwork. I couldn't compete. Lost my contract and had to sell up, and of course there was all the humiliation of selling to him—and for less than it was worth. He had me over a barrel. So I was reduced to odd jobs. I'd see my beautiful herd every day when I was on my way to mow another lawn. The resentment festered. And then I learned that Ben Black had made him an offer for the land, a huge offer, and he was selling up, for millions. He could retire and live in luxury and my cows would go for slaughter. The anger boiled over."

"But they weren't your cows anymore," the vicar pointed out. "You'd sold them."

"You don't understand about animals, do you?" he said. "I raised them from calves. They were a dairy herd, not for beef."

"So you made up your mind to kill him," Rosemary said, "and you chose poison as the method. The yew, because its dangers are well known to all farmers, and the mince pie because it was part of the tradition here."

"And Boon was a glutton," he said. "He was certain to take it."

"Your wife had made a set of pies, knowing Gertrude would be round at some stage," Rosemary went on. "You added seeds of yew to one of them and had it with you on Christmas Eve. When you got to The Withers you took the plate as if to hand it round, but you passed your poisoned pie to Douglas."

Colin glared at her. "How do you know that? You weren't even there."

Laura said, "Pastry crumbs in your pocket, the obvious place to hide it. I checked your coat just now. That was what all the fuss was about. The vicar thought I was a thief."

Rosemary said to Colin, "Thanks to Laura getting the poor man to hospital, the police were alerted. News of the poisoning went quickly around the village and at some point over Christmas, Ben Black

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got suspicious enough to come and see you. He threatened to tell the police. You panicked, cracked him on the head, and killed him."

Laura said, "And transferred the body to Gertrude's greenhouse in your pickup and trailer. She was under suspicion, so you thought you'd add to it. While you were in church just now I checked under the tarpaulin in the trailer. Bloodstains. The police will match them to Ben's blood group."

Colin's shoulders sagged. All the fight had gone out of him.

In all the excitement, Laura hadn't given a thought to her main reason for being in the house. Over supper that evening, she dropped her knife and fork and said, "The orchids. I've completely forgotten about them."

She had visions of dead and drooping plants in their dried-up trays.

"What am I going to say to Mike?" she said as she raced to the conservatory.

But the orchids were doing fine, better than when she'd taken over. The droopy ones were standing tall.

"They benefited from being left alone," Rosemary said. "He's a novice at this. The roots of an orchid are covered by a spongy material that holds water."

"Like a camel's hump?"

"Well . . . I'm saying he must have overwatered them."

That evening Wilbur was rewarded with a supper of chopped turkey and baked ham. After he'd curled up in front of the fire, Rosemary and Laura slipped out of the front door to make a call on a neighbour.

Gertrude invited them in and poured large glasses of sherry.

"I'm so grateful to you both," she said. "I must have had calls from half the village saying how sorry they are for all I've been through. I kept telling them you two are the heroes."

"Far from it," Rosemary said with modesty.

"But you are. And you, Laura, being mistaken for a thief and wrestling with the vicar."

"That wasn't so bad."

Rosemary said, "He's rather dishy. She enjoyed getting into a clinch."

They all laughed.

"And now," Gertrude said, looking happier than they'd seen her, "another Christmas tradition. To ensure good fortune for us all in the new year, I insist that you have a slice of my homemade Christmas cake. You can make a wish." She went out to the kitchen.

Rosemary said in confidence, "I'm going to wish that I survive this."

Laura said, "I'm so glad I wore this cardigan. It's got pockets." ●

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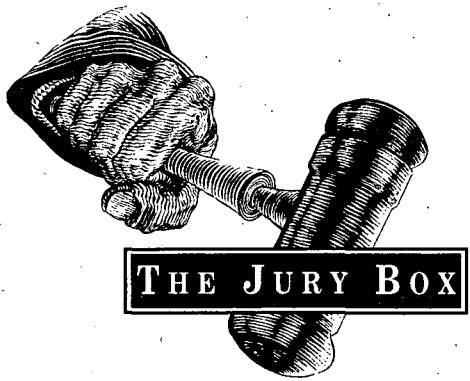

by Jon L. Breen

Looking for holiday gift suggestions? Consider first Ed McBain's landmark retrospective *Learning to Kill* (Harcourt/Penzler, $25). Of the 25 stories, first published in *Manhunt* and other magazines between 1952 and 1957, over half have previously been collected, but the introduction, story notes, and afterword the author provided before his death in 2005 are full of autobiographical and professional insights into the 87th Precinct's creator, one of the greatest twentieth-century crime writers.

**** Edward D. Hoch: *More Things Impossible: The Second Casebook of Dr. Sam Hawthorne,* Crippen & Landru, $43 signed limited hardcover, $18 trade paper. Fifteen locked rooms and miracle problems, all from *EQMM,* cover November 1978 to December 1983 in publication date and Fall 1927 to December 1931 (the Christmas tale "The Problem of Santa's Lighthouse") in the New England small-town doctor's chronology. Only the greatest names in Golden Age detection have been as ingenious in fair-play puzzle-spinning as Hoch, and even they were not as prolific.

**** Robert Barnard: *Dying Flames,* Scribner, $24. In a typically literate and enthralling entry from another *EQMM* favorite, novelist Graham Broadbent is visited at his hotel by a teenage girl claiming to be his daughter and becomes involved in the complicated mendacities of a former girlfriend. Like most of Barnard's work, the novel refuses to develop along predictable lines. Much is written about plot-driven versus character-driven novels, but in the best mysteries (like this one), the elements are blended too well for the reader to tell who's driving.

*** Bernard Knight: *The Elixir of Death,* Simon & Schuster UK/Trafalgar Square, $24.95. Twelfth-century English coroner Sir John de Wolfe, known as Crowner John, investigates a mysterious shipwreck and the beheading of a Norman knight in a novel notable for readable

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style, historical detail, well-drawn characters, and relevance to present-day events. Knight rivals medievalist colleague Michael Jecks in the provision of scholarly extras: opening and closing notes, maps, and glossary.

*** Harlan Coben: *Promise Me,* Dutton, $26.95. Returning after a six-year absence, sports and show-biz agent and wisecracking do-gooder Myron Bolitor looks for a missing teenage girl to whom he had made an ill-advised promise of help. Coben keeps the pages flying with a complex plot and a masterful final surprise, while addressing serious societal issues, but some of the comic-book supporting characters belong in another book.

*** Pamela Branch: *Murder Every Monday,* Rue Morgue, $14.95. In the American debut of a 1954 British novel, the wrongly acquitted murderers of the Asterisk Club train others in their art at a remote Dorset manor house. The droll black comedy, complete with slapstick climax, could have made a '50s movie vehicle for Alec Guinness. (Rue Morgue also offers Branch's other three mysteries, all but one new to American print.)

*** Dean Koontz: *The Husband,* Bantam, $27. Why would anyone kidnap the wife of a landscape gardener, who is obviously unable to raise the $2,000,000 ransom demanded? Some readers may question the decision to dispel most of the mystery before the halfway point and depend on pure suspense to carry the load, but the wild plotting, vivid action, and storytelling gusto will keep most hanging on till the end.

*** Ken Bruen: *Calibre,* St. Martin's/Minotaur, $12.95. London cop Brant, an Ed McBain fan who hopes to follow the equally objectionable Fat Ollie Weeks into a literary career, is up against a good-manners-crusading serial killer who admires Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me.* Fast-reading fun, if far from the author's best.

*** Katherine John: *The Corpse's Tale,* Accent/Dufour, $6.95. A mentally retarded man wrongfully convicted of the hatchet murder of a local beauty returns to his Welsh village to a less than warm welcome, while police detective Trevor Joseph investigates the reopened case. The novella inaugurates the Quick Reads series "aimed at emergent readers and adult literacy learners," but many outside that category will appreciate its solid storytelling.

*** Edward Wright: *Red Sky Lament,* Orion/Trafalgar Square, $29.95. In late-1940s Hollywood, former cowboy star turned unlicensed private eye John Ray Horn tries to find out who fingered an Academy Award-winning screenwriter as a Communist. The whodunit plot will keep readers guessing, and the pre-blacklist mood in the film industry is conveyed with a painful sense of reality. Woody Guthrie makes a memorable guest appearance.

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** Paul Goldstein: *Errors and Omissions,* Doubleday, $24.95. This first novel also considers the Hollywood blacklist, though set in the present. Why won't the aged portrait photographer who wrote the screenplay for a classic mid-century film noir sign over his rights to the studio that has turned it into a moneymaking movie franchise? The legal and historical details carry much more interest than the thriller and soap opera elements. Intellectual property lawyer Michael Seeley is a familiar fictional figure: an alcoholic with a failed marriage but flawless ethics and untarnished idealism.

Two more of Vin Packer's remarkable novels, *Whisper His Sin [and] The Evil Friendship* (Stark House, $19.95), from 1954 and 1958 respectively, have been reprinted in a single volume with new introductions identifying their bases in true crime cases and my essay on Packer's work from the 1989 collection *Murder Off the Rack.* The second fictionalizes the case of New Zealand teenagers Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, convicted of the 1954 bludgeoning murder of Parker's mother. Hulme later emerged as bestselling mystery novelist Anne Perry.

Also in a handsome new trade-paperback edition is another minor classic of psychological suspense, Theodore Sturgeon's 1961 documentary-style case study of a modern vampire, *Some of Your Blood* (Millipede Press, $12), with a new introduction by Steve Rasnic Tem and a related Sturgeon short story, "Bright Segment."

Two early works of Cornell Woolrich are available in new editions, both introduced by biographer Francis M. Nevins. *Manhattan Love Song* (Pegasus, $13.95) is the haunting 1932 book that bridged the author's F. Scott Fitzgerald and dark suspense periods. Even more obscure is the non-criminous autobiographical novel *A Young Man's Heart* (Ramble House, $18), not reprinted since its unheralded 1930 debut.

Jim French Productions, prolific purveyors of old-time radio, have introduced another new 1920s character: Freddie Darnborough, British gentleman detective in the Wimsey/Campion mode created by John Hall, best-known for his Sherlock Holmes pastiches. *Mr. Darnborough Investigates* (CD, $10.95) features two cases, the second, longer, and better of which, "The Curse of Ozymandias," is a new variation on the old Pharaoh's Curse ploy featuring some Agatha Christie-like misdirection. The cast (headed by David Natale as Freddie and Gary Schwartz as his valet and assistant Cecil) and the production values are first-rate, as are Hall's scripts.

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GARBO'S KNEES

by Terence Faherty

1.

I reached the offices of the Hollywood Security Agency a little before nine, as I usually did. A guy with two kids and a working wife hardly ever oversleeps. As I pulled up in front of the agency's little building on Roe, I got a surprise. It turned out to be the first of a full day's worth.

My boss, Patrick J. Maguire, no early riser, was up and waiting for me. He was pacing the front walk, to be exact, and using all of it, as he was also no scarecrow. At the sight of me, he tossed the cigar he'd been smoking at the nearest palm tree.

"Keep the motor running, Scotty," Paddy called to me. "We're late for an appointment."

By then he was climbing into the gray and red Edsel Corsair I was driving that year.

"Where?" I asked.

"Grauman's. Not the Chinese Theatre. Grauman's warehouse. On Seward. That headstone you've been fussing over's been stolen."

"Gabrielle's?"

"I thought that would get your attention. It got mine, too. I see a nice payday ahead for us. And maybe a chance to do a good turn for your old friend."

That old friend was Gabrielle Nouveau, real name Annie Kovacs, a silent-movie star who'd befriended me when I'd landed in Hollywood in the thirties. Now, in 1959, she was long dead and nearly forgotten. Worse, her grave had been desecrated.

Not her real grave, which was safe and sound in Forest Lawn. The one that had been disturbed was the grave of her stardom. As

Terence Faherty recently received a nomination for the Shamus Award for his 128-page novella *In a Teapot,* from his Scott Elliott series published in hardcover by The Mystery Company. The other four nominees for the award, for best hardcover of 2005, are all full-length novels. Hats off to Mr. Faherty for proving that short fiction can compete with popular novels! Scott Elliott also features in this new story.

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everyone knows, Grauman's Chinese has a unique collection of stars' autographs. They reside in the cement of the theater's forecourt, right up against Hollywood Boulevard. The practice started in 1927 when Norma Talmadge, an old rival of Gabrielle's, accidentally stepped in wet cement while touring the new theater. She'd added her name, and a tradition had been born. Not every star did footprints. Some left handprints, some both, some were more creative. Groucho Marx, for example, had imprinted his cigar, and Sonja Henie her skates.

Gabrielle Nouveau had left the standard signature and footprints way back in 1929, when the future had looked rosy for her and just about everyone else. Her little slab had stayed put until 1956, when it and a second one had been "temporarily" removed as part of a renovation to the theater's box office. The two slabs had never been replaced, despite letter-writing and petition campaigns organized by Gabrielle's old friends, including my wife Ella and me. That hunk of concrete was the "headstone" Paddy had mentioned.

"Was the other slab taken too?" I asked.

"Yes, I think it was," Paddy said, playing coy. He was silver-haired, now that he was pushing sixty. But he was still a flashy dresser. Today's tie was a collection of red, green, and blue triangles. They were fluttering in the breeze from the Corsair's open window like a string of pennants. A small-craft warning, I decided.

"How did anyone know the slabs were there to steal?" I asked. Then the answer came to me. "That television spot."

A local station had recently done a piece on the Grauman's warehouse that had included shots of the two displaced squares. I'd missed the story, but Ella hadn't. It had inspired her to start another petition drive.

"If it was that TV piece," Paddy said, "Grauman's brought this on themselves, by going after a little free publicity. Now they want it hushed up. Hence their call to us."

Hollywood Security had gotten more than its share of that kind of call. They were usually placed by vaguely titled studio executives who wanted us to put in a fix or twist an arm or closely examine a keyhole.

"Hushed up? Why?"

Paddy chuckled. "Ever played the tourist, Scotty? Ever gone to Grauman's and compared your shoe size with William Powell's? Sure you have. You probably did it within twenty-four hours of stepping off your train back in the 'thirties, all star struck, with the hay still sticking out of your ears. Then when you signed with Paramount, I'll bet you went back there and picked out the very square of concrete where your footprints were going to be someday."

As Paddy knew all too well, I was an ex-actor, emphasis on the

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ex. And, as it happened, I had staked out a stretch of Grauman's forecourt for my very own, once upon a time. That claim had since been jumped by Van Johnson, not that I held a grudge.

Paddy was breezing on. "And when you got out of the service after the war, I'll bet the Chinese Theater was one of the first places you went. Hell, it was probably one of the things you'd been fighting for."

"So what if it was?" I asked politely.

"So, in all those visits you made, real and imaginary, did you ever happen to see a slab belonging to the great Greta Garbo?"

"No," I said. "There isn't one. That kind of stunt was beneath Garbo's dignity."

Paddy beamed at me. "The guy who said a person's education never really ends must have had your picture on his desk."

2.

Grauman's Chinese Theatre looked like the MGM set department's idea of a chop suey house, with its jade green pagoda roof, red pillars, and its dragons, large and small. Grauman's warehouse, on the other hand, was strictly out of Omaha, Nebraska, its facade lacking any decorations whatsoever, unless you counted the oversize garage doors. The walls were poured concrete, naturally. Grauman's used so much of the stuff, they probably got a discount. I wondered if the workmen who'd built the place had signed their names before it dried.

The pedestrian entrance had a doorbell, but Paddy tried the knob first. It turned in his hand, and we waltzed on in. The first thing we came to was a giant gorilla's foot, cut off at the ankle and big enough inside for Paddy to use it as a bathtub.

"Forgot they did the *King Kong* premiere," he said as we circled the prop. "That was a night."

Beyond the foot were racks holding scenery flats and enough spotlights for a chain of theaters. Four very special lights came next, the giant, wheeled searchlights Grauman's used to light up the night sky during big events.

Paddy kicked the nearest searchlight's tire and said, "If the Japanese bombers had made it over here, old Sid Grauman would have been ready for them."

We heard voices and saw a trio of men standing in a sunny square beneath a skylight. One of them saw us back and hurried to meet us, a very thin man with sunken cheeks, big sad eyes, and wavy hair that looked like it had been pulled at recently.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," he said, sounding as sincere as the greeter at a funeral parlor. "I'm Frank Findley, vice president of public relations. The police are still here—" he gestured toward the men he'd just left—"so maybe you'd like to wait outside."

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"The police are old friends of ours," Paddy assured him. "We've helped them out any number of times. Before we join them, why don't you tell my associate, Mr. Elliott, about what happened last night."

Findley blinked. "You haven't briefed him? I must say I'm surprised."

Welcome to the club, I thought, though it had actually been years since I'd been surprised by Paddy's managerial style.

"I wanted him to hear it from you," the great man said. "I was afraid he'd start theorizing before he had all the data. That's a big mistake in our business."

"He keeps his cigars in a coal scuttle, too," I told Findley, but the allusion sailed over his head.

He blinked again, focused on me, and began. "Last night someone broke in here and stole three concrete slabs we had in storage."

"Three? I thought only two had been yanked when the box office was renovated."

Findley was impressed. "Two of the slabs were ones we'd removed for those box-office repairs. They belonged to actresses of no consequence. The third was quite different."

Paddy didn't nudge me in the ribs, but I felt it anyway.

The theater representative cleared his throat. "Please understand that what I'm about to tell you is in the strictest confidence, Mr. Elliott. The third slab belonged to Miss Greta Garbo. It contained imprints of her hands and her signature. She made them in 1929, at the premiere of the film *A Woman of Affairs.* Shortly afterward, the slab was removed and put into storage here. It remained here until last night."

"Removed why?" I asked.

"Miss Garbo requested it. She wasn't pleased with the slab. I've heard several explanations. One was that she'd accidentally knelt in the cement while signing her name, leaving an imprint of her knees."

"Years before Al Jolson thought of doing it," Paddy observed.

"Er, yes. There certainly were impressions of her knees in our slab. I've seen them. So maybe she'd expected them to be smoothed over and was unhappy that they hadn't been. Another story was that Miss Garbo was upset over comments made about the slab." Findley checked for eavesdroppers. "She was known for having somewhat large feet. The wags supposedly said that she'd imprinted her knees because her feet wouldn't fit. Things like that.

"Mr. Grauman," Findley continued, reverently referring to Sid Grauman, the late theater owner Paddy had mentioned earlier, "made a deal with her. He agreed to remove and destroy the slab if she would come and do another one, without knees. She said she

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would. But she was already becoming shy and reclusive. She never fulfilled her part of the bargain."

"Neither did Mr. Grauman," I pointed out. "He didn't destroy the slab."

"No," Findley admitted.

"Why didn't he threaten to stick it back in?" Paddy asked, describing what might be called the Maguire approach. "That would have gotten her attention."

"Mr. Grauman would never have threatened anyone. He held on to the slab for sentimental reasons."

"How long does sentiment last around here?" I asked. "He's been dead quite awhile."

"Nine years," Findley said for the record. "Obviously we retained the slab after Mr. Grauman's death. There was always a chance that it could be restored without offending Miss Garbo. If she . . ."

"Stepped in front of a bus?" Paddy suggested.

Findley nodded guiltily. "After Miss Garbo passes on," he said, sounding like a funeral director again, "the slab could be . . . rediscovered. That is, it could have been before last night. Now it may be gone forever. And all because of that television crew."

"Television," Paddy said, all but spitting for emphasis. "What good has ever come of that?"

3.

We were interrupted at that point by a police detective named Hughes, one of the pair who'd been hogging the square of sunlight. I'd recognized him as soon as we'd entered, and he'd recognized us. Even in a dimly lit warehouse, there was no mistaking Paddy. Hughes, a shorter than standard guy with a bony brow, may have been waiting for us to come over and pay our respects. We hadn't, and he seemed a little hurt about it.

"Should have known you vultures would be circling the water hole," he said pleasantly. Like a lot of us just then, he was watching too many Westerns.

"Nice to see you too, Detective," Paddy said and offered him a cigar. He held it well down, underscoring Hughes's lack of height.

Hughes ignored the cigar but not the slight. "This may actually be your kind of job, Maguire, though I would have expected your outfit to be on the other side of it, the taking side. Or on both, the taking side and the miraculously recovering side. Anyone ask you for an estimate in the last week or so for a lift-and-carry job?"

"I'll check our phone log," Paddy said. "In the meantime, Mr. Findley was about to tell us how word of the Garbo slab leaked out."

Hughes's kind remarks about Hollywood Security had made the public relations man even more nervous. He collected himself a little and said, "It was the television crew. It had to be. They came by

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here last week to do a story on the memorabilia stored here. The person from my office who set it up wasn't familiar with the Garbo situation. The warehouse manager thought the visit had been cleared by upper management, which it hadn't been. He showed the film crew back here." Findley pointed to a stretch of floor currently occupied by nothing at all. "They saw and photographed the Garbo artifact."

"It didn't make the evening news," I said. Ella would certainly have mentioned that.

"No," Findley said. "Luckily, the owner of the station belongs to several of the same civic organizations as our current president. He agreed to respect our privacy. The story as broadcast did not mention Greta Garbo. But word got out somehow. Someone at the station must have leaked it."

Paddy said, "I assume we're discounting the possibility of a tip-off from one of your people because they've all been with you for donkey's years. And because of the timing, the theft coming right on the heels of the newspeople's visit. Fine. How did our thieves go about it?"

Hughes actually jumped in to answer that, maybe because Findley and Paddy weren't leaving him any lines. "Door over there was broken open. There are footprints outside, enough for four men, it looks like. It would have taken at least four linebackers to heft one of those things. And there are tire marks from a flatbed in the alley."

"The alarm didn't go off?" I asked.

Findley looked sheepish. "We've never had one."

Paddy tsked at him. "Surprised King Kong's foot's still here. What's your thinking on why all three were taken?"

He asked this of Detective Hughes, who said, "They took all three to hide their interest in the one they really wanted, the only valuable one, the Garbo slab."

"It didn't work worth a damn," I said.

"What?" Hughes growled.

"He's congratulating you on seeing through it so quickly," Paddy said.

Just then, the ringing of a phone in some distant corner took Findley away from us. Hughes saw an opportunity for a heart-to-heart.

"Listen, Maguire. For once you're welcome to stick your nose in. We don't have much interest in this. That Garbo thing is on its way to some nutball collector who'll either sleep with it or have it set in the floor of his bathtub. The other two are already on the bottom of Santa Monica Bay. We're only making this much effort because Grauman's is still a big noise at the chamber of commerce. So if you can keep them out of our hair, fine. Just don't soak them for too much, or we'll come by to see you."

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"You're always welcome," Paddy said.

Hughes stalked off, followed by his bashful partner, a guy who looked like he'd be billed as "second policeman" for the rest of his life.

Findley was disappointed to find them gone when he trotted back.

"They knew you were in good hands," Paddy assured him. "Any news?"

"The phone call? No. It was the theater management, hoping for news from me. Why?"

"One possibility we have to face is that your mementos are being held for ransom. If that's the case, we should be hearing from the, ah, kidnappers shortly."

"What will we do then?"

"You'll leave everything to us, of course. In fact, maybe you and I should go over to your offices right now and put your superiors' collective mind at rest. Meanwhile, Mr. Elliott here will initiate inquiries. Any thoughts on that, Scotty?"

I had one, which took the form of a question. "One of the other slabs belonged to Gabrielle Nouveau," I said, impressing Findley a second time. "Who autographed the third one?"

"Another silent-movie actress, Nola Nielsen."

It seemed to me that Findley sniffed a little before pronouncing the name. I felt I should know why he would, too, but I couldn't quite remember.

While I puzzled over it, Findley told Paddy that his car was in the alley.

"Fine. Pick me up out front. I want to give my operative here some final instructions."

4.

"I take it that you're less than impressed with Detective Hughes's analysis of the case," Paddy said as he walked me out the way we'd come in.

"I like it fine," I said. "He's just wearing it inside out. Gabrielle's slab and the other one weren't taken as camouflage for the Garbo heist. It was the other way around. One of the unknown slabs was the real target. You can't disguise your interest in a diamond by adding a couple of aquamarines to your haul. But grab a diamond and nobody will remember what small change you took."

Paddy wasn't buying, but that only made me sell harder. "Look how much simpler it is my way. You don't need a leak at the television station or anywhere else. Someone saw the news story as broadcast and decided he had to have one of those two slabs. Some nutball fan, in Hughes's words, or someone with a connection to one of those forgotten actresses."

"'Actresses of no consequence' was how our friend Findley

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described them," Paddy said. "I'm tempted to see it your way just for the chance to make Findley eat that slight. But things aren't as simple as you make them sound. If you don't have a leak, the thieves don't know about the Garbo doohickey. If they don't know about it, how can they plan to steal it to cover up their real crime?"

"They didn't plan that part," I said. "They planned to grab both slabs from the television story so the police wouldn't focus on the one they really wanted. When they got here, they found a third one. Naturally, they took that, too."

Paddy was scratching at his forelock or what was left of it. I was responsible for a considerable thinning of that patch of hair over the years.

"Isn't it far likelier," he asked, "that the thieves just got confused? The Moe, Larry, Curly, and Shemp types who go in for this kind of work confuse pretty easily. They may have come for the Garbo slab and taken all three just to be sure they got the right one."

We'd reached the front door by then. Paddy put a hand on its knob but made no move to open it. "I'm guessing you don't see Miss Nouveau's autograph as the real target," he said.

"It's hard to imagine, given the trouble we've had getting signatures for her petitions." That left the woman whose name resonated faintly for me. "Why did saying Nola Nielsen give Findley the sniffles?"

Paddy looked mildly surprised. "It was before you hit town, come to think of it. Still, I'd have thought you'd have heard. She died badly. Back around nineteen-thirty. Killed herself, maybe."

I remembered then. "She died in a closed garage, sitting in her car with the engine running. Why the maybe?"

Paddy shrugged. "On account of the kind of life she'd led, the wild, Roaring Twenties kind of life. Booze certainly, drugs probably, men excessively. One of her beaus was a gangster she threw over. The rumors about her suicide not being entirely her idea mainly involved him. Morrie Bender."

There was nothing vague about my memories of Morrie Bender. He'd still been someone to tiptoe around back when I'd started with Hollywood Security after the war.

A horn sounded outside. Findley, anxious to relieve those corporate minds. Paddy didn't stir.

"The accepted version of Nielsen's death was that she'd killed herself over talking pictures," he said. "She made exactly one—*Sunshine,* I think it was called—but it hadn't been released at the time of her death. Supposedly, she was worried about it flopping. Then when it finally came out, it was a big hit. Some of the good reviews *Sunshine* got may have been flowers for Nielsen's grave, but the general thinking was that she'd gotten herself worked up

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over nothing. She would have done fine in the talkies if she'd given herself the chance."

"Or if someone else had," I said. "Bender has a place in Brentwood Heights, doesn't he?"

"Yes, and you've got a wife and kids. Bender may be eighty-something, but he hasn't mellowed much, not from what I hear. And he's still well connected. I'm officially denying you permission to bother him."

"How about unofficially?"

Findley tooted his horn again, a little forlornly, it seemed to me.

Paddy said, "My money's on this kidnapping idea. I'm thinking we'll hear something on the subject in an hour or so at the latest. Check in with me then, care of Grauman's."

"You didn't answer my question."

Paddy sighed. "No, I didn't. If you should bump into Morrie Bender by accident, give him my love."

5.

It took a little driving around, but by and by I accidentally found myself at the Morrie Bender estate. It was overlandscaped on the street side and gated, the gate manned by a well-dressed mob trainee. A slightly older one greeted me when I pulled up at the house. I'd gotten that far on the strength of Hollywood Security's name. The greeter, a solidly built guy with a Marlon Brando hairline, wanted more.

"This is regarding?" was how he put it.

"Nola Nielsen," I said.

He repeated it to get the pronunciation down while he checked me for a gun. Then he looked over the Corsair and said, "Jack Paar told a pretty funny joke about Edsels the other night. I can't remember how it went."

"It was something about how the guys who drive them don't like to be kept standing out in the sun, I bet." I was a little sensitive about Edsel jokes.

Brando lost his grin, found it again, and said, "How do they feel about getting tossed out on their ears? Wait a minute," he added, holding up a beefy hand. "Tell me when I get back."

He came back quickly, but it wasn't to toss me out. He showed me inside, acting puzzled about it, if not disappointed.

During my wait, I'd examined the house, a heavily timbered ranch, and imagined the interior to be something on the order of a hunting lodge. Instead, it was like a Park Avenue apartment writ large. Not that I got much of a tour. The man I'd come to see was out back, sitting next to a swimming pool with a mountain view.

Morrie Bender was thin and frail, gray-skinned and nearly hairless, but walking out to brace him, I felt a little like I had the day my outfit boarded ship for occupied France. It was his gaze that

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conveyed the threat. Though his eyes were yellow and rheumy, the look they were giving me was as fragile as a bayonet. It was a look I'd seen once or twice before in the eyes of dying hard-cases, a willingness—even a desire—to take someone with them.

He smiled when I drew close, but it didn't soften things. "Hollywood Security, huh?" he said. "You one of Paddy Maguire's boys?"

"Yes," I said, trying not to glance at the chair he hadn't invited me to use.

"How is the big mick?" he asked. He seemed to do about half his talking on the inhale.

"Fine."

"Getting older?"

"Yes."

That pleased him. "I tried to get him drunk one night. At Ciro's, maybe. In 'forty-three, I think it was. I was sixty-five then. I thought Maguire knew something I wanted to know, so I kept the drinks coming. That was a waste of my money. I changed the combination on my safe the very next day. I was that sure I'd told him more than he'd told me. Nothing about Nola Nielsen, though. I'm damn sure of that."

"Paddy didn't send me. He didn't want me to bother you."

"What bother?"

"But he did ask me to give you his regards."

Those were the magic words. "Have a seat," Bender said. "Tell me why you're here."

I started to tell him about Nielsen's slab. He stopped me with a smile that really was a smile.

"I was there the night she made that thing," he said. "It was nineteen twenty-eight. I was fifty. Thought I was still twenty-five. I wasn't at Grauman's officially. That wouldn't have looked so good. But I was in the crowd. They had a regular little ceremony. We went dancing afterwards, I remember. Nola had her motor wound up that night, I can tell you."

That brought us to the awkward part of my pitch. Experience had taught me that there was no smooth way to accuse someone of a crime, so I dove right in, describing the theft of the slab from the warehouse. Luckily, Bender had even more experience as an accusee than I had as an accuser. And he'd been accused of a lot worse than stealing concrete. His smile barely dimmed.

"You think I saw that story on the TV and decided I had to have her footprints as a keepsake? Not a bad thought, except that I hated that little blonde's guts. If I'd lifted that slab, it'd been so I could use it for a urinal.

"So now you're wondering what happened after that night at Grauman's in 'twenty-eight to get me feeling that way. So I'll tell you. She walked out on me. Me. She thought she had to choose between her movies and me and she chose her movies.

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"I would have talked her out of it, except that she ran away to New York, a town where I wasn't welcome. Spent most of nineteen twenty-nine there. Working with Broadway dramatic coaches so she'd be able to talk on the screen, that was the story. But it was really to give me time to cool off, which I did."

"You don't sound that cool right now," I said.

"That's over what she did when she came back. She almost got me a seat in the gas chamber. After she killed herself, I had the cops in my hip pocket for weeks. They'd never been able to get me for something I'd actually done. But I was sure they'd get me for that, something I had no part in. Then it blew over."

End of story and, I was afraid, the interview. I threw out another question. "Do you know anyone else who might have wanted a keepsake of Nola? Did she have any family?"

"Back East somewhere. I can't remember their name. Nola Nielsen wasn't her real name, but so what? Everybody changes his name out here. Even me. My real name's Benderwitz. That's how I signed myself in at Ellis Island in nineteen oh-one. I was twenty-three."

"How about Nola's friends?"

"I remember one pal of hers. Sort of a paid companion, a girl from her hometown. Her name was Rita something. She was a looker herself, was Rita. And a wildcat too, like Nola. They were a pair, those two."

The memory of that pair wore him out, or maybe it was all the talking. He waved me out of my chair. "Thanks for coming. Tell that big mick boss of yours to keep his nose clean."

6.

It was time to report in and get an update on the kidnappers, but I still thought they were figments of Paddy's imagination. So I drove downtown to the courthouse and followed a trail in its worn linoleum that led me to the office of the county recorder. There I asked to see a copy of Nola Nielsen's last will and testament. I was hoping the will would point me toward Nielsen's family and friends, that some of them would be in the greater Los Angeles area, and that at least one of those would still be breathing.

The clerk, who was old enough to have delivered Nielsen's newspapers, said it would take awhile. He pointed to a row of gunmetal chairs and told me to make myself comfortable. I made myself uncomfortable instead worrying over whether Nielsen had bothered to change her name legally. Not every star got around to doing that. If Nielsen hadn't, her will would be filed under Gladys Knockwurst or whatever her parents had christened her. And I'd be scrambling around trying to track that name down.

It was a nice little worry, more than enough to keep my pipe going at a steady clip. About the time I'd reduced all its tobacco to

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ash, the clerk returned with an extra-long folder and good news. Nola Nielsen had died under her screen name, like a good star should.

Though typed on a long sheet of paper, the will was fairly short. There was a token bequest to Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Axlerod of Columbus, Georgia, Nielsen's parents, almost certainly. Another small gift went to "my pal" Rita Koenig. She had to be the Rita that Bender remembered so fondly, the paid companion. The bulk of Nielsen's estate went into a trust to be managed by the Golden State Bank and Trust. The documents defining the trust weren't included in the folder.

I asked my friend the clerk for that missing piece, and he referred me to Golden State's trust department. "And good luck with that," he said.

On my way out, I stopped in the lobby at one of a bank of pay phones. My phone's directory contained no listing for a Rita Koenig. I then used the phone itself to call Grauman's front office. The receptionist knew exactly who Patrick J. Maguire was. Everybody in the building did by then.

"Talk them out of a drink yet?" I asked when the man himself came on the line.

"No. It's drier here than a Baptist funeral. No calls from any slabnappers either. I'm running out of stories."

"That'll be the day. Do we know anybody at Golden State Bank and Trust?" I described my visit with Bender and my interest in Nielsen's will.

"Seems to me I played canasta with a guy from that bank once," Paddy said. "You want the details of the trust, I take it. Call me back in an hour."

It was lunchtime by then, for the dawn patrol at least. I visited a little eatery near the courthouse that had a lot of associations for me, good and bad. I spent awhile wandering down memory lane. Then I called my wife to see how the latest screenplay was going. Then I called Paddy.

"I may have let you down," he said. "My old canasta partner wasn't as forthcoming as I'd hoped he'd be. According to him, Nielsen's trust was dissolved in nineteen fifty-five. It'd been set up for the benefit of a single male child. Once the kid turned twenty-five, the thing just folded."

"Whose child?"

"My friend wouldn't say, wouldn't even give me the kid's name. That makes me think it had to be Nielsen's. I never heard she had one, but she might have gone out of her way to keep it quiet. That would fit with all this trust secrecy."

I wasn't as fast on ages as Morrie Bender, but I'd spotted a problem. "If this kid was twenty-five in nineteen fifty-five, he was born

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in nineteen thirty, after Nielsen got back from her year in New York."

"So she got knocked up out East in 'twenty-nine. Maybe by some stockbroker she'd talked off a ledge when the market crashed. You do funny things when you think the world's ending."

"But she made a movie in nineteen thirty, her talkie, *Sunshine.* Somebody would have noticed if she'd been pregnant."

My boss wasn't concerned. "It only took a few weeks to shoot a movie back then, even with microphones bollixing up the works. She must not have been showing yet."

It occurred to me that I should have spent my lunch hour down at the *Times,* boning up on little things like the actual date of Nielsen's death. Paddy's thoughts were tending a different way.

"I wonder if Morrie Bender knew that she'd taken up with someone back East. Could have given him a little more reason to have shut her up in that garage. Assuming he was the jealous type. You'll have to ask Miss Koenig about that."

"Rita Koenig? How am I supposed to find her?"

"Did I forget to mention that? She was the mystery kid's guardian. My banker friend let that slip. She drew a monthly check from the trust right through nineteen fifty-five. The address where those checks were sent is up in Vesta. Got a pencil?"

7.

Vesta was a sunny little spot on the coast about halfway to Santa Barbara. It was so sunny on this particular afternoon that the dark glasses I'd used to fight the Pacific's glare on the drive north were still in place when I knocked at the door of the seaside cottage where Rita Koenig's trust fund checks had landed. The shades might have accounted for the reception I got from the lady of the house, which was cool. The woman, who was wearing a bathing suit under an unbuttoned housedress, might have taken me for a cop or even an IRS agent. She told me that Rita Koenig didn't live there anymore. Hadn't for years. And who the hell cared where she was now?

I still did. I went in search of a phone book, as I had in L.A., and found Koenig right off. The listing had her on a street called Chester, which turned out to be more than a few blocks from the ocean. And on the wrong side of the tracks, if Vesta had been big enough to have tracks. The actual address belonged to a boarding-house, an old brick one. Koenig wasn't home, but her landlady was, a Marjorie Main look-alike who was weeding an overrun flower bed. She was more than happy to tell me where Koenig worked. I'd remembered to reveal my steely-blue eyes this time and even to bat their lashes occasionally.

Koenig's place of business was a diner that made the hole-in-the-wall where I'd had my lunch look like the Brown Derby.

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Koenig turned out to be the first person I came to when I entered, a little fiftyish woman perched on a stool behind the diner's cash register. Bender had called Koenig a wildcat, but somehow she'd changed into a wild bird over the years. She reminded me of a sparrow, though the coloring of her dyed hair and penciled brows was much darker. She had sharp features and quick eyes, the eyes made extra prominent by her glasses. I thought for a second that she might be in charge, but when I asked for five minutes of her time, she glanced at a big guy who was scraping down the grill.

"I get a break in ten minutes," she said. "There's a bench out front." She pushed a pack of Old Golds my way and held out a hand, palm up.

"I don't use them," I said.

"I do," she said back.

I paid her, found the bench, and started in to field-strip and clean my pipe. I was twisting the stem back into place when Koenig came out. The first thing she did was to hold her face up to the sun for a few seconds. From the look of her skin, the action was more a ritual than an impulse.

She'd specified the bench, but she didn't use it. "All I do is sit," she said and held out her hand for the Old Golds.

I towered over her when I stood to light her cigarette, so I sat down again so I could look into those magnified eyes.

At first she only smoked, going at it so hard it got me longing for a Lucky Strike. Then she asked, "What's this about Nola Nielsen?"

I'd mentioned the actress back at the cash register. The name had gotten Koenig's full attention then. Now she was acting as if it barely rang a bell.

"I'm trying to trace her next of kin," I said, "regarding some property of hers in Los Angeles." A four-by-four chunk of property, suitable for driveway repair.

"What makes you think I even knew her?"

I decided to jump us ahead a few moves. "She trusted you to raise her son. And you drew a monthly check from her estate for twenty-five years."

"Never trust a banker," Koenig said. It was a sentiment popular with people old enough to remember 1929. The cashier went further. "Never trust anybody. That's what I always told Nola. Nobody in Hollywood was what he seemed. But she trusted everybody, even me."

"When did that start?"

"Way before Hollywood. She and I grew up together back in Georgia. Even then I was just tagging along. Her people had money. Mine didn't."

"Is that where the trust fund came from?"

"Some of it. From a rich aunt. But a lot of it was Nola's own

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dough. She was making a thousand a week once she hit it big in pictures. That was serious money back then."

It still was, for people like Koenig and me. I said, "Then *The Jazz Singer* came out and the world changed. What happened next?"

"Nola ran off to New York to learn how to talk without a Southern accent. Took her the better part of a year."

Koenig had worked the same trick, but then she'd had thirty years in little Vesta. She was on her second Old Gold by then, lighting it from the first.

"She came back pregnant. Some Broadway director, she said. Might have been some Broadway cabdriver. She wasn't far along. She had time to make one last picture."

"Sunshine," I said.

It was more information than a flunky trying to trace a next of kin should have had, but I didn't expect Koenig to call me on it. I'd already asked her questions I shouldn't have asked and revealed more interest in her past than I should have had. She seemed more than willing to chat, at least about the dead and buried.

"After the movie, we went upstate and hid out until Nola had the kid. That was the start of the bad times."

"What happened?"

"Nola got the blues. They can hit a woman bad after her kid is born."

"I know," I said. "My wife had two."

"And then *Sunshine*'s release was delayed. Because it stunk, Nola decided. She got real worked up about it. On top of her depression, it was too much. Next thing I knew, she was dead and I was stuck with the kid."

Not a very sentimental summing up, but I let that pass. "He's the one I'm looking for," I said.

"Well, you can just keep looking." She ground her cigarette under a dainty heel. "I don't like your story, the little I've heard of it. Nola didn't leave any property lying around. I knew where every nickel was stashed. Who really sent you?"

Not what business but what person. There was only one who'd be interested, as far as I knew. "It wasn't Morrie Bender," I said.

She'd been bracing herself to hear that name, and it still made her jump. She was halfway to the lunch wagon before I could get off the bench.

"I'll never tell you anything," she said as she backpedaled. "You or Bender, either. I'll die first."

8.

I knew Paddy would be critical of my approach to Rita Koenig. For one thing, I hadn't once mentioned Grauman's loss. And I hadn't tried to bribe her, if you didn't count the pack of cigarettes. Paddy

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would have lit her first one with a five-dollar bill just to catch her eye.

But I thought my boss would approve of what I did next, which was to stop at a corner store on the same street as Koenig's boardinghouse and buy two very cold bottles of Coca-Cola. Armed with those, I ambled to the boardinghouse itself, where Marjorie Main's understudy was still fighting her losing battle against the weeds.

She turned down the offer of the little bottle opener from my pocketknife and dispatched her bottle's cap by rapping it expertly against the stone sill of one of her windows. But she did accept my story that I'd gotten turned around and hadn't been able to find Koenig's diner. She patiently repeated her instructions and had me parrot them back.

That left us with most of our Cokes to finish. We'd just about killed them when her curiosity finally got the better of her.

"This isn't some trouble for Rita, is it?" she asked.

"Could be," I said.

"With the kid? She's had all the trouble she needs from that skunk. I told Rita him moving down to L. A. was a big mistake."

"It might be about him." I took an envelope from my pocket—my phone bill—and pretended to study it. "What's his name?"

"Peter Thorpe."

"Nope," I said. "Different trouble."

I walked back to the mom-and-pop where I'd left the Corsair and used the store's phone to call Hollywood Security. The woman who answered, Peggy Maguire, Paddy's wife and the firm's secret brain trust, promised she'd have a line on Peter Thorpe by the time I got back.

I called her again from a roadside booth on the coast highway around Castellammare. Her directions took me into the hills above West Hollywood, to a house built out over the edge of a canyon.

A late-model Continental convertible was baking in the driveway, though the house had an attached two-car garage. The Mark III could have belonged to a visitor, of course. Or there could have been two even more valuable cars in the garage. But I was hoping the space was otherwise occupied. I tried the overhead door. It was locked.

I moved from there to the front door. The man who answered it was dressed for cocktails at the yacht club in white flannels and a dark blue blazer. He was blond and slight and nervous.

"Peter Thorpe?" I asked.

He stammered his yes. I showed him my card and asked if he'd be willing to help with an investigation I was conducting. He said yes again, making a real project of it this time. By then I was sure I'd come to the right place. As I backed him into the low-ceilinged living room, I decided to skip the foreplay.

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"Those slabs you had lifted from Grauman's warehouse, got 'em handy?"

If my question surprised Thorpe, his reply really shocked me. He reached into a side pocket of his blazer and pulled out a gun. Or almost pulled it out. It was a snub-nosed revolver, and its hammer got caught on the corner of the pocket, as hammers will. I had time to grab his wrist and tag him on the chin, more or less simultaneously.

In my haste, I hit him harder than I had to. He would have collapsed into his white buck shoes if I hadn't had a firm grip on his gun hand. I steered him to an armless sofa and disentangled the revolver, which I put in my own pocket.

Then I hunted around until I found the connecting door to the attached garage. The space beyond the door was empty except for something that looked like a card table draped in canvas. I pulled off the tarp, and there was Nola Nielsen's concrete autograph, resting on a pair of sawhorses. She'd had tiny feet and the handwriting of a ten-year-old, if you could judge a person's writing by how they did with a stick in wet cement. I looked everywhere but down in the canyon for the other two slabs. There was no sign of them.

By then, Thorpe was sitting up. "It's mine," he said. "I have a right to it."

His speech was a little thick, but I'd evidently cured his stammer. "Are we talking about the gun or that little souvenir in the garage?"

"She was my mother. I don't have anything of hers." He contradicted himself by looking toward a low-slung fireplace. Above it hung an old photograph of a striking young woman with bobbed platinum hair and a smile that curled wickedly at the ends. Nola Nielsen.

"You have her money," I said, looking around the rest of the room. The bric-a-brac alone was worth as much as my car. "Rita Koenig could use some of your spare change, by the way. Things are a little tight for her just now."

"She's gotten all of my mother's money she's going to get. She sponged off Nola when she was alive, then she lived in style off my trust fund. Living right on the beach, like *she* was the movie star."

"She's moved inland since," I said.

"I don't care where she is. She got a year more on the gravy train than she was entitled to. That's more charity than she deserves."

"How did she manage that?"

"By lying to me and everyone else about my age. Her and that shyster trustee. I should have prosecuted them. They controlled the trust fund until I turned twenty-five. That's how my mother set it up. Rita always told me I was born in 1930. That kept me

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under her thumb until 1955. But when I finally got to see my mother's papers, I found my birth certificate. I was really born in 1929. Rita'd cut herself in for an extra year of easy living."

That revelation nearly did to me what my right cross had done to Thorpe. But I came out of it faster.

"Your birth certificate say where you were born?" I asked, almost conversationally.

"Of course," he said. "New York City." He added proudly, "My father was a Broadway director. Richard Thorpe."

"His name appear on the birth certificate?"

Thorpe's stammer made a comeback. "No. He and my mother weren't . . ."

"How did you find out about him?"

"Aunt Rita told me. My name was always Thorpe. She told me how I'd come by it. It was about the only time she was ever honest with me.

"She had Nola cremated, Aunt Rita did. And then scattered her ashes in the ocean. So I don't even have a grave to visit. When I saw the TV story about mother's slab being in Grauman's warehouse, I knew I had to have it. I even picked out a spot down in the canyon where I was going to have it set. A place where I could plant flowers."

"What happened to the other two slabs?"

"I told them to dump them out in the desert somewhere."

"Told who?"

"My gardener set it up for me. He said he knew a guy who knew a guy who'd do it, but I think he just hired his relatives. I told him to take both slabs—they talked about two on the television. That way the theft wouldn't point to me. Then, when he delivered my mother's slab, he said there'd been three. Tried to get me to pay extra. I sent him packing."

A fancy blue phone occupied an end table near Thorpe's sofa. I pointed to it with the snub-nose, which I'd produced without snagging my pocket.

"Time to call him and apologize," I said.

9.

Thorpe was able to reach his gardener friend. With my encouragement, he worked out a price for recovering the two discarded slabs and returning them to Grauman's warehouse bright and early the next morning.

"Tell them to ring the bell this time," I said.

I then used the blue phone to report my success to Paddy. My partial success. "It's a no-questions-asked deal," I said. "They'll be getting back two of the items. Gabrielle's and the one with the knee prints."

"Why only two?"

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"The third was damaged beyond repair."

"I see," Paddy said. "Well, I don't think they'll kick about that. I'll be anxious to hear your full report. Anything else you want to tell me now?"

"Hold the line." I gestured with the gun toward the front door and said to Thorpe, "You mind?"

He didn't. He'd been a new man ever since I'd told the lie about his mother's slab.

When he was gone, I said, "How much leverage do we have with Grauman's?"

"Plenty," Paddy said, "since they still want Garbo's name kept out of this. It's going to take two postmen to deliver our bill. Why?"

I broke open the revolver and shook the shells out onto the carpet. "This morning you mentioned doing Gabrielle a good turn."

"Having her reinstated, you mean? Or is the word I want 'reinstalled'? Leave it to me."

Outside, Thorpe was staring at his Continental as if he didn't recognize it. "Why did you say that?" he asked. "About Nola's slab?"

"I thought she'd like you to keep it," I said.

I was feeling altogether too soft by then. As a pick-me-up, I tossed the gun at him and told him that I'd be back if the other two slabs weren't delivered by noon the next day.

10.

I could have gone home to mow the grass with a clear conscience. Instead, I drove north along the coast to the little town of Vesta. It was early evening when I arrived, a beautiful, still evening, the sky cloudless, the ocean a big blue pond that happened to reach all the way to Japan.

Koenig had finished her shift at the diner. She wasn't at her boardinghouse either. No one was. I played a hunch and stopped at the little corner store to ask after the nearest public beach. On its edge, I found her. She was sitting with bowed head on a bench that was the twin of the one I'd used earlier in the day. I sat down beside her and took out my pipe.

"Who invited you?" she said, sniffing a little. She'd been crying.

"That's a long story, Nola."

"What did you call me?"

"Nola. As in Nola Nielsen." I finished filling my pipe and brushed the stray bits of cavendish off my pants.

That gave my companion plenty of time to come up with a reply. The best she could do was, "I'm Rita Koenig."

"I don't think so. I think Koenig died in a sealed garage almost thirty years ago. I'm afraid you helped her with that."

I got my pipe going and dropped the spent match in the sand at our feet. "Here's how I figure it. Way back around nineteen

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twenty-eight, you found yourself in a bad spot. You were pregnant, and the father of the child you were carrying was a gangster named Morrie Bender. You'd already had enough of Bender, but he wasn't ready to let you go. You knew if he found out about the kid, he might never be ready. Worse, the kid would grow up with a gangster father.

"So you ran away to New York, a town that was off-limits to Bender. You gave out the story that you were being coached for the talkies, and maybe you were. But you were really there to have the kid on the sly. You came back after a year and brought the kid with you. Set him up someplace quiet with a nurse or a nanny or both and got back to making movies. Bender had gotten over you, so everything had worked out fine.

"Then Rita Koenig, your paid-companion pal, spoiled the whole deal. She knew the truth, of course, and she threatened to go to Bender. She started bleeding you. She cut herself in for a slice of everything you'd tucked away.

"Meanwhile, *Sunshine*'s release was delayed. All around you, silent stars were dropping like matinée Indians. You decided that you were through anyway and that you might as well throw over the whole setup.

"So Koenig took your place in the garage. Did you dope her or get her drunk or just whack her on the head?"

Nielsen opened her purse and pulled out a twist of paper and cellophane, all that was left of the cigarettes I'd bought her. I produced a purchase I'd made when I'd stopped to ask for directions to the beach: a fresh pack of Old Golds.

She looked at the peace offering and said, "I told you this afternoon I wouldn't talk."

"That's when you thought I worked for Morrie Bender." I told her then why I'd really come to Vesta, the mystery of the missing slabs, complete in ten installments. Somewhere around episode six, she took the cigarettes and lit one gratefully.

When I'd finished, she sniffed again, collected herself, and said, "I got Rita drunk. It wasn't very hard."

"What about her hair? I'm guessing Koenig was a brunette, since you are now."

"I got her to dye hers that last afternoon. That wasn't very hard either. She'd always wanted blond hair. She'd always wanted anything I had, including Morrie Bender. I couldn't trust her not to tell him about Peter, even with me paying her. I was afraid she'd do it just to get back in with him."

"Did you and Koenig look that much alike?"

"Enough. And I saw to it that the body wasn't found right away."

"And that it was cremated. And you changed your son's age to make it impossible for Bender to work out that he was Peter's

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father. You had to get the guy who ran your trust to go along with that."

"The trustee was a pal of mine, a real pal, a lawyer who worked for my studio. When Peter found out his real age, he thought we'd done it to cheat him. That was fine with me."

"How is it he never recognized you? He's got your picture hanging up in his house."

"Does he? By the time he was old enough to ask about his mother, I'd already changed. I'd dyed my hair and started to wear the glasses I'd needed for years. And I was careful to tell him that I looked a lot like his mother. He threw that in my face later. Said I was giving myself airs. Like the cottage by the sea I didn't deserve. I've always loved the ocean. Just being able to sit near it every night means a lot to me."

It was about all she had left. "Why don't you tell Peter the truth? He'd give you your cottage back."

"Would he? Would you do a favor for somebody who told you your father was a thug and your mother was a murderess? Anyway, I deserve to be punished."

She looked into my face for the first time, maybe to see if I had any thoughts of my own on the subject of her punishment.

I had, as it happened. My thoughts were of Nola's last picture, *Sunshine,* and its unexpected success. How had she reacted to that? Well enough at first, maybe. But how about years later, when the son she'd done so much to protect had walked out on her? And how about now, during the long shifts at a greasy spoon? Did she ever think of *Sunshine* and wonder?

I stood up. "Sorry to have bothered you, Miss Koenig."

As I turned to go, she asked, "How did *you* recognize me?"

I hadn't. My tip-offs had been the birth certificate she'd lied about and her declaration to me that afternoon that she'd die before she told anyone the truth. She hadn't sounded like a clapped-out guardian then. She'd sounded like a mother.

But I played along. "I've seen your footprints in cement, remember? I'd know those size sixes anywhere."

She smiled for the first time in our acquaintance. The smile curled at the ends, just like it had when the world was young. ●

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Art by Ron Buccio

CANDY CANE WARS

by James Powell

Near midnight, with a light rain falling, the tall officer in military greatcoat and plumed shako entered the ruined village just behind the lines. Gilbert de Filbert, colonel of the Nutcrackers, quickly found the *estaminet* he was looking for in the cellar of a ruined cottage. A small horseless caravan with "Porcupine Brothers Circus" emblazoned across its canvas side stood near the steps down to the entrance.

The colonel paused for a moment to turn his weary, lantern-jawed face skyward, wondering again why it was always bad weather and Christmas Eve when the Mouse King's gray minions and his Ratavian allies faced the soldiers of Toyland in the trenches. Then he went down into the smoky, low-ceilinged cellar.

A sharp-eyed, sharp-nosed, stubble-faced hedgehog behind the bar polished a questionable glass with a dubious rag.

Beyond the few empty tables a fire burned in the fireplace. A booth stood in either chimney corner. In one sat a solitary figure hidden in a hooded moleskin cape. In the other, five wooden soldiers whose faded and chipped paint marked them as veterans of the Candy Cane Wars laughed and drank with a jolly, if shopworn,

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nest of matryoshka dolls.

De Filbert slung his military greatcoat across the bar and set his shako on top of it. When he'd stroked the rain from his fierce moustache, he pointed to a bottle. Then he complained, "Landlord, this place stinks of mouse."

"Well, now, it would have to, wouldn't it, Colonel?" replied the hedgehog, bringing the bottle and a glass. "The Mouse King's people occupied this sector for a long time, didn't they?"

"Vermin," said the nutcracker, downing his drink and making a face to match his moustache.

James Powell's latest Christmas story for us is a tale of espionage behind enemy lines and the threat of biological warfare. As always, elements of the story can be traced to interesting bits of information the author has picked up over the years. For instance, "just before or during World War I," he tells us, "there was an English music hall song about Gilbert the Filbert, the Kernel of the Nuts." (This story's Colonel De Filbert!)

As the owner refilled his glass, the colonel nodded disapprovingly at the floor. "A bar floor without sawdust is like a Christmas tree without tinsel," he complained again.

The hedgehog shrugged. "There's a war on, in case you hadn't heard." He moved away to resume his dubious polishing.

The colonel grunted to himself. For some reason or another this year's batch of war shortages included sawdust and kriskringlite, the rare ore Christmas tinsel was made from.

He planted his back against the bar and looked around the room again, noticing for the first time the table under the staircase where a fat porcupine in a thick quill overcoat with long coattails brooded into a mug of lager. A tall ringmaster's hat lay on the table at one porcupine elbow and a heavy brass caravan key at the other. Horseless caravans were wind-up things based on music-box technology.

De Filbert guessed that Mr. Porcupine there had tired of the main roads with their bothersome military police checkpoints and heavy traffic of fresh wooden soldiers moving toward the Front and turned off here to refresh himself.

Yes, thanks to the switch to wooden soldiers and the assembly lines of Toyland, the army of the Rodent Alliance was now outnumbered in the field. Earlier toy soldiers had been lead, until they started dying off as if there was something in their drinking water or the pipes it came in. So the powers that be had gone to tin. Though steadfast enough, tin soldiers tended to come out of the molding process missing one limb or another, more suited to hook-and-peg work along pirate lines than soldiering.

So they turned to wood. And wood had worked out. Thank God, for the stakes were high. It would be a disaster for humankind if

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Toyland lost the war. The toy, as they say, is father to the man. Humans remember more of old playthings than they realize. Know it or not, poets hone a toy's merest musings to craft their verse; novelists quarry toy dreams and adventures to plot their stories; philosophers turn toy platitudes into eternal verities.

Now for the business at hand. Tossing his greatcoat over his shoulder, De Filbert threw a bright play-money bill on the bar, picked up his shako and drink, and crossed the room.

The porcupine raised his head to peer at him through thick eyeglasses as he passed.

Sliding into the booth across from the hooded figure, the colonel murmured, "Herr von Rat, I presume."

A high-pitched whisper corrected him. "Ratte, it rhymes with latte. Richthofen von Ratte."

The nutcracker raised a wooden eyebrow. He'd been sent there by Toy Military Intelligence to make contact with its most valuable agent. He had expected a gruff Ratavian accent, not something you might hear from behind a baseboard. Still, what did it matter? The Rodent Alliance was doomed. Starvation stalked the Kingdom of Mouse and, to quote a *New Toyland Times* headline, "Rat Riots Roil Ratisbon." No wonder rodents were deserting the sinking ship.

"You are late, Colonel de Filbert," said Von Ratte.

Yes, he was late. The colonel might have answered that all ruined villages look alike. But he hated traitors even more than he hated rodents. So he said, "At night all cats are black." Talk of cats always took the wind out of mice.

Von Ratte knew what he was up to. "I am not a mouse," he squeaked, giving each word equal weight. "I am, in some fashion or other, supposed to be a rat." Here he opened his cape and raised his hood, revealing a face more shimmer than substance, like moonlight slow-dancing across dark waters. Ratlike, yes, but with large roundish ears, blank disks for eyes through which he somehow saw. He wore lederhosen over a black body stocking.

Lederhosen made the colonel think of Switzerland. So he asked, "You some kind of wind-up cuckoo-clock Johnny? Or one of those fancy new marionettes, the what-do-you-call-'em, the Geppetto Wireless?"

"I'm a toy just like you," Von Ratte squeaked.

The colonel thought his companion gave off a smell of warm celluloid mixed with buttered popcorn when out of temper.

Von Ratte continued, "Those jack-in-the-boxes at Military Intelligence wanted some kind of a magic-lantern thing who could pass for a rat. Well, R and D botched the job big time. So here I am. Oh, the rat recruiters signed me up all right. But they thought I looked so funny they made me entertainment officer."

Here the face inside the hood winced as though in pain and then dimmed wearily. Von Ratte put a three-fingered glove to his tem-

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ple. "R and D tried to correct the royal hash they'd made of things by hoisting me up into an electrical storm in a box kite with bolts attached to my neck," he explained. "I am no stranger to headaches, Colonel."

When De Filbert opened his mouth to sympathize, Von Ratte cut him off. "I don't want your pity," he said, adding an urgent, "Listen, I was not spawned willy-nilly in some dark corner like a mouse or a rat. I was designed by an intelligent hand and created for a purpose, just like you. I asked for this meeting so I could tell you, toy to toy, that we've got to call off the Big Push." He pulled a map from inside his cloak and spread it open. "Something's very wrong in Sector Five."

As Von Ratte spoke, the colonel saw the porcupine get up, wave his hat at the bartender, and take the steps up to the open air with the big brass key under his arm.

De Filbert turned back to the map and shook his head. "We've finally got the Ratavians looking the wrong way. Daytime tin zeppelin overflights report all enemy troop movements have been out of Sector Five into Sectors Four and Six where we've massed our fresh troops. At dawn our seasoned units will break through their front line in Sector Five." He shoved his hand across the map. "Nothing'll stand in our way. Then we'll outflank them, right and left. Why call off a perfect plan?"

"Because the Ratavians are up to something."

The colonel waited.

"Even after the Ratavians started to pull out I heard stories of heavy night traffic along this road," said Von Ratte, drawing a finger across the map on a line leading north from the Front through the middle of Sector Five. "Late yesterday I went for a little look-see. I found myself a good spot about here in a hedgerow beside the road and settled in. Just after nightfall along came these two closed wagons with a heavy rat dragoon escort. Now this stretch of road's rutty as hell. One of the wagons must've popped a knothole. After they'd passed I found this narrow trail of sawdust on the road."

"Sawdust?" The colonel frowned.

Von Ratte tapped the map. "The trail turned off here onto wagon tracks across a field. I followed, and just beyond some trees, there it was: a giant tent all fenced round with barbed wire and crawling with rat dragoons."

The colonel looked over at the table where the porcupine had been sitting. "So let's add things up. We've got a big tent. We've got sawdust. Sounds like a circus to me."

"I'm entertainment officer," Von Ratte reminded him. "If there was a circus in Sector Five, I'd be the first to know."

"So what are we talking about?"

"You tell me," said Von Ratte. "But the canvas would hide it from the air."

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The colonel cradled his massive jaw in a thumb and forefinger. His one big fear was germ warfare. He knew laboratory rat scientists were working on a spreadable form of the Dutch Elm disease to use against Toyland's wooden soldiers. Had Von Ratte lucked onto some kind of biological-warfare facility?

The rats already had a perfect delivery system. The Christmas Eve before last they'd used their mortars to hurl glass shells filled with Greek fire into the trenches, causing havoc among the ranks. Today's wooden soldiers were protected from Greek fire by a fire-retardant lacquer. But Dutch Elm was another kettle of fish.

The colonel stood up. "Come on. Let's take a closer look at what you've found."

Outside, a cold wind had driven the rain clouds away, leaving a sky decked out like a Christmas tree with starry constellations: there the Great Rocking Horse and there the Lesser.

The colonel had come by wind-up toy motorcycle and parked on the village outskirts. With Von Ratte in the sidecar directing the way, they sped off between hedgerows down a narrow country lane lit by the rising moon.

As he drove, the colonel reflected on how much he'd missed the snow. Last year on night patrol he'd stopped to let his men watch a woods fill up with the stuff. He remembered how peaceful it was with the snow coming down on little cat feet. As it happened, he knew the owner, a stuffed bear who used the property for a picnic ground. Not long afterwards, on furlough in town, he ran into the bear and mentioned stopping there. "Hey, be my guest," came the reply. Stuffed animals were like that.

Later he told his wise old medical corps buddy Toby, by far the ugliest apothecary jar on the shelf, about that pleasant meeting. Toby understood. He said one of life's small treasures was a toy village with a real stuffed animal in it.

Squeaking over the whir of the motorcycle, Von Ratte asked, "Ever wonder what the hell this is all about?" By "this" he clearly meant the war.

"The rodents are after the children's candy canes and sugarplums under the Christmas tree," replied the colonel.

Von Ratte gave a high-pitched laugh and started to reply. But a loud "sproy-oy-oy-ing!" interrupted him. This was followed by an even louder noise, like the lingering clatter of a tray of flatware being slowly spilled down onto a hard surface. (Noises had become considerably drawn out since 3StoogesRusco won Toyland's sound-engineering contract.) The motorcycle came to a sudden stop with a huge mare's-nest of metal spring billowing from its rear end.

Dismounting, the colonel gave the machine a healthy kick, muttering, "Had the damn thing in for a lube and a good wind-up just before I left headquarters."

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Their mission was urgent. Dawn was less than five hours away. They pushed the dead motorcycle into the bushes and hurried off on foot. When they'd walked for a bit, Von Ratte returned to what he'd been saying. "Let the rat bastards have the damn candy. What makes this our fight anyway?"

Raising his hand for silence, De Filbert looked back down the road behind them. In a moment, the Porcupine Brothers Circus caravan came trundling along. A lantern above the driver's seat revealed Mr. Porcupine nodding behind the steering handle. He'd almost passed them when his head popped from his quilly chest. "Hey, need a lift?" he asked. "Going far?"

"To Bloques," said Von Ratte, naming a village on the Toyland side of the Front just southeast of Sector Five.

"Kind of close to the action for me," came the reply. "But I'll get you to St. Golliwoq-les-Deux-Eglises."

"That'll do fine," said the colonel, though he found it strange that Mr. Porcupine, who left the *estaminet* ahead of them, had ended up behind. They hadn't passed him on the road.

"Climb on up, then," said the circus owner.

The ample driver's seat was none too big to hold the fat creature in his quill overcoat. But when they slid warily past him they found the cargo of gunnysacks in back made comfortable seating. Mr. Porcupine pulled a lever and the caravan rolled forward.

"You and your brother performing hereabouts?" asked the colonel.

The animal looked quizzically back over his shoulder. Then he understood and smiled. "I'm an only child, Colonel," he said. "'Brothers' is just something we circus people call ourselves. To spread the blame." He shook his head and returned to his driving. "No, wartime's no place for circusing. First your clowns get sent off to officers' training school. Next all your bandsmen get drafted."

"And the sawdust shortage mustn't help," ventured Von Ratte.

"Tell me about it," agreed the porcupine.

In a clatter of harness a brigade of toy cavalry dashed by looking smart astride their stick-and-horsehead mounts. Behind them marched a regiment of wooden soldiers whose cheeks still bore the red circles the toy medical corps painted there as certificates of good health.

"A fine-looking bunch," said the colonel proudly. "They'll give a good accounting of themselves. Hearts of oak."

"Bodies of pine, though, eh?" said their driver.

Yes, the nutcracker had to admit the enlisted toy soldiers were pine. Only the officers were hardwood.

"Me, I like my pine a bit saltier," added the porcupine as an afterthought.

Before his call-up to Christmas duty, the colonel had served in a toy box in rural Ontario amid walnut trees with shells so thick his jaws ached at the memory. Nighttime meant much gnawing from

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the direction of the outhouse. Porcupines, they told him, favored outhouse wood salty with urine.

"Tell you what a circus owner does in wartime," said the porcupine. "First he restocks his supplies. Like those spangles you're sitting on. Boy, do we go through spangles. I paid a little visit to the local spanglesmith back there in What-do-you-call-it where I first saw you gentlemen.

"Second, a circus owner searches out new acts for when the world comes to its senses again." He laughed. "You two, for example, could be circus stars. You, Colonel, could be a rock eater, Billy the G., the Human Goat. And your friend there could be the Celluloid Man, a.k.a. the Human Shirt Collar." For the rest of the journey Mr. Porcupine regaled them with stories of the circus life.

At St. Golliwoq they bid goodbye to the circus owner. As the caravan rolled away, Von Ratte said, "Funny how every time we got to a military checkpoint our friend Mr. Porcupine dropped his voice. What was that all about?"

"To make me put my head outside the wagon to catch what he was saying," said the colonel. Seeing a nutcracker officer, the Toy Military Police invariably waved the caravan through. The colonel scratched his jaw, wondering if the creature had sabotaged his motorcycle for just that purpose.

The colonel and Von Ratte worked their way along the front-line trench north of Bloques, which was crowded with battle-scarred Toyland units catching what sleep they could with Zero Hour little more than four hours away.

At last they reached a long observation sap jutting out into nothing's-land. At the end of it an officer was waiting for them. He saluted, helped Von Ratte into a black rat dragoon greatcoat, and handed him his sword and kepi. The nutcracker's spy companion buried his face in the coat's broad lapels. Then he and the colonel slid over the sandbags and crawled out on knees and elbows onto the battlefield following the breach in the barbed wire Von Ratte had made on his way over.

The low moon lit their way across a morbid landscape of bloated, rotting rodents dead from the toxic cork shrapnel from the popguns, and the broken and well-chewed remains of wooden soldiers. When at last they stopped to rest in a shell crater, Von Ratte gestured around at the carnage. "I still say, why's this our fight?" When no answer came he continued, "You know what I mean. You and I were designed. But the mice, the rats, and the children, yes, the children too, are animals spawned willy-nilly in dark corners."

"You'll have to try your regimental padre on that one," said De Filbert. But he felt it did Von Ratte credit that he'd framed the question. No rodent would have, not even a church-mouse. Then he added, "Perhaps it's a small price to pay for immortality. Toys

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who fall in the Battle for Christmas don't die, you know. They live on in the dim of grownup memories." Maybe he ventured a step too far when he added, "Like 'Rosebud.'"

"'Rosebud,' my ass," said Von Ratte bitterly and crawled off toward the rodent lines.

When they were within hailing distance, Von Ratte called out "Camembert," the rodent password. Then they slid over the lip of the trench. As agreed, the colonel now raised his arms and became Von Ratte's prisoner, captured on night reconnoiter. A few mouse foot soldiers came in their pink and gray uniforms to sniff De Filbert and make threatening squeaks. But they let Von Ratte march him back behind the lines to the prisoner pens.

The last of the mouse light infantry and rat dragoons crowded the roads now, heading into Sector Four and Sector Six. The colonel watched an anti-zeppelin artillery unit swing past complete with a makeshift searchlight made of a flashlight mounted on a roller skate. A brigade of rat lancers with bright pennants followed after them.

Rat cavalry were formidable and ingenious fighting units. A rat rode another rat until the mount tired. Then the mount became the rider and any rat guilty of leaning on the whip got a taste of his own medicine. This rat read on the Golden Rule gave them a primitive democracy. Where mice were all squeak, nibble, and mob, rats were disciplined and resourceful.

The colonel studied them as they passed. He marveled at the constantly churning noses, how each cupped ear moved independently this way and that to catch every sound and silence, the black unblinking eyes and sharp yellow teeth.

Oh, he'd heard all the atrocity stories, how rats killed pets and bit babies and ate all the cheese and soup and pickled sprats. He made a sour face. The pickled sprats part, now that was hard to swallow.

And here came a double column of leather-jacketed rat artillerymen transporting fragile glass mortar shells to their batteries the same way they looted eggs in peacetime. One rat lay on his back and cradled the precious cargo in his four legs while another threw the egg carrier's tail over his shoulder and dragged it away. De Filbert looked hard and deep into the glass shells. What was it this time, more Greek fire, Dutch Elm, or some other concoction from hell?

Von Ratte and his prisoner marched deeper into Sector Five until they reached the quiet, rutty road the sawdust wagons had taken. Here the colonel lowered his arms, by now as numb as wooden dowels, and rubbed them vigorously. The moon peeped down on them just over the treetops as though standing on curious tiptoe. Von Ratte studied his map by its light.

Suddenly an approaching drum of rat feet sent them ducking into the hedgerow just as a dragoon patrol rushed by. After that

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they kept to the countryside behind the hedgerow where the going was slower but safer. This caution cost them time. Dawn was only three hours away when they got to the place where the sawdust wagons had turned off the road. When they reached the small stand of trees they crouched down. Ahead of them stood Von Ratte's immense tent, its perimeter surrounded by barbed wire.

The colonel judged the place large enough for a biological-weapons facility. But how to get inside to find out for sure? Rat dragoons patrolled inside the compound and out. As he pondered, he heard a familiar hum. Working its way up the slope behind them came the circus caravan. A white sheet with a red cross now covered the Porcupine Brothers emblazonment. The driver wore a white medical duster over his spiny coat and had a Red Cross badge stuck in his hatband.

This explained everything. Mr. Porcupine was a spy. He would cross the front line disguised as a rodent doctor, part of the wounded exchange program, bound for the military hospital at St. Golliwoq. Once inside Toyland territory he'd throw off his disguise and travel about with a sharp eye out for troop movements and artillery batteries, calling himself a circus owner looking for new acts.

As the back of the caravan passed, the colonel clambered on, pulling Von Ratte up after him. When the caravan emerged from the trees, some rat dragoons came galloping up and, shouting for the gate to be opened, they escorted it inside.

The caravan trundled deeper into the compound and then came to a stop. De Filbert cut two peepholes in the canvas with his saber and they saw they were next to a long wooden trough which stood inside another barbed wire enclosure of considerable size. A line of bowlegged wrangler rats in ten-gallon hats and with barbed wire braided into their tails were passing buckets filled with a steamy slurry of sawdust gruel from hand to hand. As the colonel watched, a wrangler dumped the last of it and then banged on the trough with the empty bucket.

Out of the darkness at the far end of the enclosure rushed a good fifty beaver moving on all fours. Teenagers, judged the colonel. Beaver were notoriously nearsighted. These hadn't yet taken the eye test for the glasses they'd need to qualify for licenses to walk on their hind legs.

Colonel de Filbert uttered a curse. Better Dutch Elm disease than beaver. The very name made pine forests tremble and moan like the night wind working at the windows of a nursery dollhouse where a lonely toy yearns for sleep.

He and Von Ratte exchange pale glances. Then they returned to the peepholes to watch the beaver shoulder and fight each other to get at the skimpy gruel until the trough was dry.

Now the circus owner stepped up on the driver's seat of the caravan. He threw off his hat, duster, and long-tailed quill overcoat,

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revealing himself to be no porcupine but a beaver. And no mere beaver. The heavy gold chain now visible across his chest proclaimed him to be Big Beaver himself, Grand Master of All the Beaver Lodges.

As the beaver in the enclosure grunted loudly and unhappily around the empty trough, Big Beaver said, "My dear young friends, traditionally our people have held ourselves aloof from the Battle for Christmas, judging our rodent brothers effete city folk, delicate nibblers and noshers who scorned our lumberjack appetites. In its wisdom, our High Council has always asked this simple question: 'What's in it for yours truly? Candy canes? Sugarplums?'" Big Beaver shook his smiling head.

Here a young beaver stepped forward. "Please, sir," he asked, nodding at the trough, "can I have some more?"

"More?" said Big Beaver. "More? Oh, Oliver, you shall have much more. This very dawn you and I will breakfast on whole regiments of wooden soldiers freshly cut from juicy pine." He smacked his lips. "There's richness for you. Yes, we beaver will grow fat beyond the dreams of gluttony. Just before dawn you will take up your positions." Big Beaver mimicked Oliver's tiny voice to ask, "'But please, sir, how can we directionally deprived young beaver find our positions in the darkness?'"

Beaver, the colonel knew, had no sense of direction. Anything beyond upstream and downstream and they were lost.

"My fine young beaver," continued Big Beaver, "if you're serious about breakfast, let these be your bywords: Follow the Glitterati!" With this oratorical flourish he stepped down to the pounding beaver tail applause and went over to confer with a circle of rat brass.

"'Glitterati'?" asked Von Ratte.

"It's rodent for will-o'-the-wisps."

"I don't get it," said Von Ratte.

"Neither do I," said the colonel. But he was more concerned with the image he had of a horde of hungry young beaver chasing wooden soldiers from the battlefield like wide-eyed, terrified gingerbread men. "You were right," he admitted. "We've got to warn our people to call off the Big Push."

Von Ratte looked around hopelessly at the barbed wire and hostile garrison.

A moment later, a rat dragoon vaulted up into the driver's seat, turned the caravan around, and drove out the compound gate. He parked it in a garage beside the entrance, took the brass wind-up key, and left, closing the doors behind him.

Astonished by their sudden luck, the colonel and Von Ratte stretched out among the sacks. They'd wait until the coast was clear, sneak outside, and run like hell back to the Toyland lines. The Jumping Jacks in Signals would semaphore back to the high command. Orders for a disciplined pull back of the wooden regi-

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ments would come down the chain of command. Maybe a concentration of tin armor and a sustained artillery barrage could fill in the gap in the line.

Suddenly the colonel sat up straight. Hadn't he heard a click back there when the garage doors closed? He jumped down and checked. They were padlocked in.

They lit the caravan's lantern and searched the garage without finding another way out. Two hours to dawn. "Let's use our old noggins here," urged the colonel. "Why lock the garage? What are they protecting?" He got up into the caravan. Von Ratte followed close behind with the lantern. The colonel thrust his saber into a gunnysack and watched as a stream of liquid silver poured out into his cupped hand. Then he poked at the puddle of silver with a finger. "Minced tinsel!" he exclaimed.

"Spanglesmith, my ass," said Von Ratte. "When he left the *estaminet* our Mr. Porcupine-slash-Big Beaver paid a little visit to the local dealer in black-market tinsel."

The colonel nodded. "They're going to use the caravan like a tinsel spreader and make a trail the beaver can follow by moonlight."

Von Ratte brightened. "Hey, that means they'll have to come back for it." Then he sagged. "By then it'll be too late to warn anyone." With a shrug he said, "Minced tinsel. Who'da thunk it. Awhile back I dreamed of these seven little Hi-Ho brothers who sang a lot and mined kriskringlite in Tinseltown. Funny, right?"

The colonel knew toy dreams often pre-shadow some human event. So what? The dreamer never sees it come to pass. He blew out the lantern and turned away from the glow behind Von Ratte's lapels. His noggin worked better in the dark.

As the colonel explained his plan, they heard rat voices outside and a key in a padlock. The nutcracker surprised the two dragoons come for the caravan, holding them in armpit headlocks until they passed out from lack of air. They left them both, gagged and tied up back-to-back to one of the garage uprights.

Von Ratte, in his rat-dragoon greatcoat, backed the caravan out of the garage and waved to the guards at the gate. Beyond the compound barbed wire they could hear the wrangler rats snapping their fierce tails, trying to whip the beaver into a herd. Then the caravan was rolling down the trail toward the road with the colonel in back shoveling tinsel out in double handfuls and the moon above them sailing high and free.

When they reached the road, Von Ratte called, "Now where?"

"Make like we're heading for the Front," said De Filbert. With no time to warn the high command, maybe they could lead the beaver off on a long wild-goose chase.

After a few minutes, Von Ratte called back, "We're coming to a fork in the road. Call it. Left or right?"

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"Take the one that looks the less traveled."

Von Ratte chose the right lane and that seemed to make all the difference. Before long the lane had turned and was running parallel to the Front.

They passed a ruined stone barn. "Hey," shouted Von Ratte, "Now I know where we are. I scouted this area last year during the big Scandahoovian scare." A chance sighting of picnicking rat senior citizens had sparked a rumor the Gray Norwegian breed had thrown in with the Rodent Alliance.

"So what?" asked the colonel.

"So up ahead a couple of miles there's this pine grove. It's well off the road to the north. Two toys carrying a couple of sacks of tinsel each could lay a trail back into it."

Abruptly the caravan slowed and rolled to a stop atop a narrow stone bridge over a creek. The colonel cursed and leaped out the back. He was starting the first turn of the wind-up key when a rat cavalry patrol came galloping up. They must've found the rats in the garage and followed the tinsel trail.

When the six rat dragoons saw the nutcracker, they dismounted, becoming twelve. De Filbert drew his weapon. If they captured the caravan now, the rats would still have time to double back with it and get the beaver back on course. That mustn't happen. He ran the first two rats through the body as they charged. Then he snapped off the head of a third with his terrible jaws and spat it into the road.

The nine rats remaining fell back, panting and wary, for nutcrackers had a formidable reputation among their enemies. The colonel shouted to Von Ratte for help. But his companion was hunched over in the driver's seat, his fingers on his temples. Damn fine time to get a headache!

With a show of sharp yellow teeth, the rats charged again. De Filbert ran another through. A second rat wrapped his tail around the nutcracker's leg like a whip and tried to pull him off balance. When that failed he buried his teeth in the nutcracker's sword arm.

Tossing his weapon to his other hand, the Colonel severed the rat's head and fought on encumbered for several minutes until the dead rat's tail uncoiled from around his leg and the head released its grip on his sword arm.

Now a cheer went up from his attackers. A patrol of rat lancers arrived, the vanguard of the beaver herd. Behind them he heard the cries of the wranglers and the huff and puff of the beaver. Then he saw the herd itself, shapes moving beneath a tarpaulin of darkness.

About to be overwhelmed, the colonel pulled out the caravan's brass wind-up key, put it between his jaws, and bit it in half. As the taste of brass filled his mouth he heard creaking timber and a loud snap. His jaw had broken. De Filbert stood there agape, with his lower jaw resting on his chest, sword in hand, ready for death

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and immortality.

Just then the beaver herd arrived in a great pile-up. Promised the tinsel trail would lead them to breakfast, they milled about in truculent confusion, knocking riders from their mounts as they searched for their food with feeble eyes.

Suddenly Oliver, the beaver who'd asked for more, saw a shimmering figure running down the road beyond the caravan. "Follow that Glitterati," he shouted. In an unstoppable rush the beaver shouldered the rats aside and pushed their way between the caravan and the bridge rampart, setting the vehicle rocking back and forth on its wheels. As the last beaver passed, the caravan overturned, blocking the bridge.

The colonel knew the will-o'-the-wisp was his comrade-in-arms Von Ratte, running naked toward the distant grove of pine to draw the beaver after him.

As the herd disappeared up the road, De Filbert waved his saber at the rats, inviting death. But they had their hands full dragging the caravan out of the way. It was some time before the rat cavalry could ride off after the beaver.

The wranglers, being civilians, stayed behind. They ignored De Filbert, made a campfire on the spot, and hunkered down around it. An old toothless one with a guitar struck up a homesick lament about how he missed Pickled Flats. Or was it pickled sprats? The colonel wasn't sure, for just then the cork artillery opened up from the Toyland lines. The Big Push had begun.

An hour later, his broken jaw bound up with a strip of gunnysacking, the Colonel came trudging up the road. He imagined he looked much like the dead Jacob Marley in a dream he had once, come back to haunt his partner Ebenezer Scrooge into changing his skinflint ways. Crazy the names you find in sleep.

Distant toy trumpets were sounding another advance when he found the place by the roadside where the underbrush was heavily trampled down. Soon he came to a half-demolished stand of pine trees and a heap of snoring and sated young beaver. He searched on. Of course the rats had returned to their regiments. It was Von Ratte he was looking for.

Finally he saw a glow as faint as fireflies through the trees. Hurrying over, he found his companion, or what the rats had left of him, scattered across a clearing, slashed by saber blades and pierced by lance heads.

The colonel gathered the bits and pieces into a pile like a heap of faint embers. Then, as he watched, the glow dimmed and was gone. He spread his greatcoat over the dark remains and stood there.

Whether Von Ratte believed it or not, toys who fall in the Battle for Christmas never die. Someday some aspiring cartoonist in a dull day-job business meeting will look down to find he's doodled

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Richthofen von Ratte's face on his notepad, the big ears, the disks for eyes. He'll smile and raise his pencil, meaning to hide what he's done behind a graphite downpour before his supervisor sees it.

But then he'll stop and smile again, half-remembering something, and he'll draw the hero's lederhosen shorts and add a buttoned front. Now the name Ricky von Rat will come to mind and be dismissed. No, not a rat. It doesn't even look like a rat. Besides, mice are nicer. Ricky von Mouse? Maybe. But let's lose the "von." Milton Mouse? Manny? No. But he thought he was on to something. Resolving to work on the name, he'll fold the drawing and put it in his pocket.

A line of wooden soldiers with fixed bayonets moved across the clearing. The colonel watched them disappear through the trees, knowing he himself would never see action again or have another chance at immortality. Oh, old Toby's colleagues the glue doctors would give him back a profile as good as new. But his jaw would never be combat-worthy again.

No, Gilbert de Filbert, colonel of the Nutcrackers, would end his days an unsung commissariat desk jockey. Meanwhile, and you could bet on it, Richthofen von Ratte, a.k.a. Mr. Whatever, God bless him, would be a star with his name up there in lights. ●

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The Theft of the Five-Pound Note

by Edward D. Hoch

Far the most popular of all of Edward D. Hoch's series characters, eccentric thief Nick Velvet returns this month in a tale that takes him to Britain's Isle of Wight. Nick has traveled well around the world, with several volumes of the series' stories in print in distant places such as Japan. The most recent Hoch collection, however, is *More Things Impossible: The Second Casebook of Dr. Sam Hawthorne* (Crippen & Landru). ✝

The woman who was paying Nick Velvet thirty thousand pounds to steal a five-pound British banknote on the Isle of Wight had arranged to meet him at a casino in Berkeley Square. The name she'd given Nick was Mona Walsh and he wasn't too concerned about its authenticity so long as her money was authentic.

She said she'd be at the roulette table at nine o'clock, and he'd see her name. He should tell the man at the door that he was her guest.

Passing through a red velvet drape, he found himself in a moderately sized casino that bore little resemblance to those back home. The noise level was considerably lower due to the absence of slot machines, though he knew some London casinos had a few to satisfy American tourists, along with the Texas Hold 'Em poker tables that had become so popular. Looking over the roulette tables, Nick could find no one who seemed a likely client. There were only three women at the roulette tables and all were firmly attached to middle-aged males.

Then he noticed one of the croupiers. She had an Irish face to go with a name like Walsh, and as he edged closer he saw that the name badge on her jacket read *Mona*. Just a moment after nine another young woman came to relieve her. Nick edged over a bit and followed her out of the casino into the adjoining hotel lobby.

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"Can I buy you a drink?" he asked quietly as he caught up with her.

She smiled at him. "Smooth as velvet."

"That's me."

"Sure, let's have a drink in the hotel bar. Why not?"

The bar was large and crowded with tourists. She led the way to a corner booth out of sight from the door as Nick slid in next to her. "What'll you have?"

"Whiskey and water." She was attractive in the innocent manner of young Irish women, wearing virtually no makeup and with her brown hair falling loosely around her shoulders.

He ordered the same. When the drinks came she passed a thick envelope along the table to him. "There's a ticket from Waterloo Station to Portsmouth, and another for the ferry across to the Isle of Wight, plus your retainer and a tape recording of instructions. That's all you'll need."

"And why do you want this particular five-pound note?"

"No questions. You're being well paid."

He sipped his drink. "That I am. How soon do you need it?"

"What's today—Tuesday? How about Friday night, same time, right here?"

"Fine."

She stood up, leaving her drink unfinished, and headed for the restrooms. He sat there till she came out, walking quickly toward the front door while she slipped a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

He was leaving the casino a moment or two behind her when suddenly he heard her scream. A thin, pale man with a shaven head had accosted her and was spraying her with liquid from a bottle. Nick smelled the acrid odor of petrol and leaped forward. He knocked the still-unlit cigarette from her lips and pushed her down, then went after her attacker. But the bald man was too fast. He ran across Berkeley Square and Nick's pursuit was blocked by a truck. A moment later the assailant had vanished into the evening crowd.

Nick went back and helped her to her feet. "You'd better remove that jacket," he told her. "What in hell was that all about?"

"There was a similar incident in Kensington recently. A patron who'd lost a large amount of money sprayed petrol on a woman croupier and the roulette table, trying to set them on fire. This seems to be a copycat crime. Thanks for your quick action."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Just a bit shaken up. I have to get out of these clothes."

A small crowd had gathered and he saw a bobby working his way toward them. "The police will need a statement from you."

"Of course." But she wasn't waiting to be questioned. She moved to mingle with the departing customers as a police car arrived in

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Berkeley Square. "Forget the whole thing. The deal's off."

"Your money—"

She shook her head. "It may have been a warning. I can't take a chance."

"I'm the one who'll be taking the chance. I'll listen to your tape."

Before she could reply, the bobby came between them. "Move along, sir," he told Nick.

Back at his hotel, Nick opened the envelope and counted out the stack of hundred-pound notes. He examined the train and ferry tickets, then turned to the tape recording. He had no way of playing it, and this late at night there was little hope of finding a music shop or electronics store that was open near the hotel. Instead, he phoned Gloria back home and told her he might be returning sooner than expected.

Still, Nick figured he owed Mona Walsh something. He'd told her he'd listen to the tape, so in the morning he purchased an inexpensive tape recorder and took it back to his room, stopping on the way for a takeout breakfast. As he drank coffee and munched on a Bath bun, he heard her voice on the tape:

"Hello, Mr. Velvet. I'm so relieved you've agreed to help me. Enclosed with this tape you'll find a round-trip train ticket between London's Waterloo Station and Portsmouth, on the English Channel. Once you arrive there, proceed to the nearby ferry terminal and take the high-speed catamaran to the north coast of the Isle of Wight. Then a brief trip on an electric train takes you to Smallbrook Junction, where you'll find the Isle of Wight Steam Railway. It's run largely by volunteers and travels just five and a half miles through the countryside to Wootton. There are usually three or four passenger carriages pulled by a steam locomotive more than a century old. I want you to steal a five-pound note from the wallet of the engineer, a man named Vince Bundy. You must do it without injuring him, the conductor, or any of the passengers. The five-pound note I need has the serial number ED56788658, with the Queen's picture on the front and Elizabeth Fry's picture on the back. Deliver it to me at the time and place agreed upon."

Nick wondered who Elizabeth Fry had been to rate having her portrait on the back of a five-pound note. Then he thought about the casino attacker, who might not have been a disgruntled gambler after all. Perhaps she was right and he'd been hired to send Mona Walsh a warning. If that was the case, he'd done his job. She was reluctant now about the task for which she'd hired him. But that didn't mean he should pocket the advance and forget the whole thing. The least he could do was to use the tickets and take a ride on the Isle of Wight Steam Railway.

He caught the train at Waterloo Station, keeping an eye out for

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anyone who might be following him. The trip was less than ninety minutes by train to Portsmouth, and another half-hour by water and train to Smallbrook Junction. There he awaited the arrival of the steam locomotive on a platform that seemed to have no road or foot access. A man wearing a conductor's cap was Nick's only companion. "You visiting here?" he asked.

"Just touring. I'd heard about the steam railway and decided to come see it."

"I'm Josh Lydon," he said, extending his hand.

"Nicholas. Pleased to meet you. I see you work for the railway."

Lydon, a tall, dark-haired man in his thirties wearing wire-rimmed glasses, smiled and shook his head. "I don't work for them. Most of us are volunteers. It's like having the world's best miniature train to play with."

As if on cue, the sound of a steam whistle cut through the air and the train itself appeared around the bend. It was indeed a miniature, looking even smaller than it was because the platform was at door level and Nick walked on without having to go up any steps. A few passengers left the train, including a woman with a shopping cart and a man with his dog. Josh Lydon was apparently relieving the other conductor. They exchanged a few words and as the train started Lydon moved through the cars, collecting tickets from a handful of passengers. "How long does the trip take?" Nick asked, making conversation.

"About twenty minutes, if there are no animals on the tracks. Then we turn around and come back."

"Anything special I should see on the island?"

"You're not far from Osborne House, outside of East Cowes. It was Queen Victoria's favorite home, designed by her husband. She died there in nineteen-oh-one. Parts of it are open to the public."

"Does this train go there?"

"No, you'll have to change at Wootton."

The steam whistle sounded a sudden warning. "Animal on the tracks?" Nick asked.

"Probably, or else Baden tooting at his lady friend. He does that sometimes."

"You fellows know each other well?"

"Most of us work for a local printer when we're not on the trains. They print the *Daily Wight* newspaper and do some work for the French across the channel."

"Is Baden the engineer?"

"Till we get to Wootton. That's when Vince takes over."

Nick stared out at the unspoiled countryside. "Any chance I could meet the engineer when we get to Wootton? "

"Sure. Baden likes to show off for visitors. We have a ten-minute layover there. I'll come get you."

Their only stop was a brief one at Havenstreet, the little rail-

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road's main station, and they reached Wootton in twenty minutes. As promised, Lydon took him to the front of the train and they boarded the locomotive together. Baden Ormand, the engineer, was about Lydon's age, with a smile that revealed a broken front tooth. "Always happy to show off my pride and joy," he told Nick. "Would you believe we still run a coal-burning steam locomotive in the twenty-first century?"

Nick reached up to the knotted cord that hung overhead. "Is this the steam whistle I heard?"

"Sure is! Give it a tug."

Nick was rewarded by the familiar blast of the whistle. As if on cue, a gaunt man with a curly red beard and hair to match came aboard the engine, wearing jeans and a T-shirt advertising the railway. "Who's this?" he asked, gesturing toward Nick.

"My name's Nicholas. They're just giving me the tour."

"Tour costs money," the bearded man told him with a grin. "What do you think keeps us in beer?" He held out his hand. "I'm Vince Bundy. Glad to have you aboard." He and Ormond exchanged a few words about the way the engine was performing and they both shoveled a bit more coal into the hopper. Then Ormond stepped off and Josh Lydon moved back to the passenger compartments to collect tickets.

"Mind if I journey back to Smallbrook Junction with you?" Nick asked.

The bearded engineer shrugged. "Long as you got a ticket to ride."

Nick produced the other half of his round trip. "This good enough?"

"Sure."

"I'm an American, you know."

"You don't say! I never would have guessed."

"Still trying to learn about your currency."

"It's pretty simple, really."

"Yes, but— Look, do you have a five-pound note? I want to ask you about that woman's picture on it."

"The Queen?"

"No, no—I mean on the back. Do you have a bill handy?"

Bundy tooted the whistle to signal their imminent departure, then took out his wallet. "What about it?" he asked, producing a fiver.

"Who is this Elizabeth Fry? We never heard of her back in the States."

"Beats me. I think someone told me she was a nineteenth-century Quaker, something to do with prison reform."

The bubble of Nick's hopes burst. Getting a look at Bundy's five-pound note had been easy enough, but it was the wrong serial number. He considered simply knocking the man out and stealing

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his wallet, but quickly discarded the idea. The note he sought might not be in the wallet and even if it was, the train was already in motion. Nick's days of diving from moving trains were long past, if they'd ever existed at all. Besides, his instructions were to harm no one.

He left the steam engine at Smallbrook Junction but did not immediately board the electric train to the boat dock. He sat instead on the station platform for a time, trying to decide his next move. It seemed likely that the sought-after five-pound note must have writing of some sort on it. Perhaps someone had drawn a treasure map on the Queen's cheek. In her job as a croupier at the Berkeley Square casino, Mona Walsh might have come in contact with all sorts of shady characters.

Someone exited the electric train and walked across the platform to join him on the bench. He glanced up, startled to see his erstwhile client. "So you came anyway," Mona Walsh said.

"What are you doing here?"

"The man who tried to burn me might try again. I decided to stay away from the casino for a while."

"So you've come here to do what?"

She shrugged. "Get my hands on that five-pound note, but I don't know how."

"I met Vince Bundy and a couple of the others. I even got him to show me a five-pound note from his wallet, but it had the wrong serial number."

"He always has it with him. I'm sure it's in his wallet."

Nick thought about it. "Tough job taking a man's wallet without mugging him. I'm no pickpocket."

"Can't you trick him somehow?"

"Maybe." A plan was beginning to take shape. "It would help if you told me why this particular bill is so valuable."

"It's valuable because it's not valuable."

He smiled. "A paradox worthy of your British author Chesterton. If I get it for you will you explain it all then?"

"All right," she agreed with a smile. "You'll deserve the truth."

"Will you be staying here on the island?"

She nodded. "I'll be at a bed-and-breakfast place in Ryde. Here's the phone number. When do you think you'll have it?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

Nick spent a busy evening in one of the nearby towns, finding just the right person for what he had in mind. On the following day he boarded the steam railway at Smallbrook Junction for the ten-thirty run. The conductor was a stranger but he told Nick that Vince Bundy was indeed at the controls. They rolled into Havenstreet right on schedule and the bearded engineer stepped out of the locomotive to stretch his legs. "That you, Nicholas?" he called

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out. "Can't get enough of our steam trains, eh?"

"I decided to try it again," Nick told him, and out of the corner of his eye he saw a young man dash forward, holding a spray bottle of liquid. When he was only feet away from Bundy he squirted his pants several times with the liquid, aiming at his groin.

"Stay away from my girl!" the man yelled, and immediately leaped from the platform to vanish into the underbrush.

The conductor and a few passengers were too shocked to do anything, but Nick jumped forward. "That was petrol!" he shouted at Bundy. "We have to get those pants off you before the engine sets them on fire!"

There was indeed a cloud of steam coming off the engine and the terrified engineer offered little resistance as Nick yanked the pants down. "Who—who was that crazy guy? I didn't touch his girl, whoever she is!"

Nick had the pants off. "Do you have any spare ones?"

"I—yes, in the station house. I have a locker."

Nick helped him to the locker and placed the petrol-soaked pants on the floor. "Here's your wallet," he told the engineer, handing it over.

"Thanks. Why in hell should anyone try to set me on fire?"

"I suppose it was a case of mistaken identity." They'd been joined by the conductor and a couple of passengers, and Nick left as soon as he could.

Later, when he was safely back on the electric train, he examined the five-pound note he'd found in Vince Bundy's wallet. It had the serial number Mona needed, ED56788658, but there seemed to be no mark on it. She was waiting for him on the dock and her tense expression relaxed when she saw the smile on his face. "You have it!"

"I have it," he confirmed. "Now let's stop for lunch and you can tell me all about it."

Over a roast beef sandwich and beer in a private corner of a local pub, she studied the five-pound note on the table between them and said, "There it is, worth every pound of your fee."

"You told me it's valuable because it's not valuable."

"Exactly! It's counterfeit."

Nick picked up the banknote and examined it. "Who would go to the trouble of counterfeiting a five-pounder?"

"They did it as a test, to see if they could duplicate the security features of the new banknotes." She took a wrinkled bill from her pocket and laid it next to the one on the table. "See? They have raised printing, distinctive paper, multicolored numbers, metallic thread, even a fluorescent number that appears under ultraviolet light. Vince Bundy has managed to duplicate every bit of it."

"Is a perfect counterfeit worth thirty thousand pounds to you?"

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"This one is. I met him at the casino and we had a relationship for a time. He told me about his scheme, to produce near-perfect counterfeits and smuggle them into France, where they could be exchanged for euros with a minimum of risk. He calculated that an outlay of a hundred thousand pounds would produce a million pounds of counterfeits. I wanted to be in on that but our relationship started to go sour and he said no, he didn't trust me anymore. We broke up and I decided to have nothing to do with him. I even changed my cellular phone number so he couldn't call me. But then I had a better idea. I decided to steal his five-pound banknote, the test note, and threaten to report him to the police if he didn't give me a chance to buy in. After what happened at the casino the other night I thought he was trying to kill me."

"So now what?"

"After I pay you, I'll still have about fifty thousand pounds to invest in his scheme, and he'll have to take me on as a partner."

Nick's eyes widened. "I never knew being a casino croupier paid so well."

"I had other income on the side." She took another envelope from her purse. "Here's the balance of your thirty thousand."

"Thanks." He opened the envelope enough to flip quickly through the banknotes.

"If I had a hundred thousand I'd go for the whole thing. It's easy money with a minimum of risk. The counterfeits won't even be passed in this country."

She thought for a moment and added, "You wouldn't be interested in something like that, would you? You're sitting there with thirty thousand pounds of my money. Want to invest it?"

"I don't think so. It's out of my line."

"Could you at least come with me when I meet with Vince Bundy? I'd feel safer having a man along."

Nick hadn't worked very hard to earn his fee, and it seemed he could give her another day of his time. "All right. How soon can you set it up?"

"I'll call him now." She produced a cell phone from her pocket and punched in a familiar number. When he answered, she said, "Hello, Vince. This is your old chum Mona. I want to talk some more about a possible business deal. . . . No, no! I've got money and I'm sure you'll cut me in. Did you notice anything missing from your wallet?" She paused, giving him time to check, and Nick could hear his outrage over the phone. "All right. Quiet down, Vince. Are you cutting me in or do you want this five-pound note delivered to the police?" She listened for a bit and then said, "Of course I've got the money. I'll come see you this afternoon at four, after your last run. I'm bringing someone with me, so don't try any tricks."

After she snapped the cell phone shut, Nick decided he should

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tell her, "I'm not carrying a weapon. The British laws are too strict."

"Vince isn't a violent man," she assured him.

"That's not what you thought when you got sprayed with petrol."

Shortly after four o'clock they were seated around a table with Vince Bundy. Of course he recognized Nick at once. "You're the pants thief!" he said. "I should have guessed you were up to something. God, your buddy scared the hell out of me with that petrol. Now I know how you felt at the casino, Mona."

"You didn't get hurt and it worked, didn't it? Now let's get down to business. I've got fifty thousand for a share in your scheme. Either you take me in or I tell everything."

Bundy scratched at his whiskers. "An even hundred thousand would be better."

"I don't have it."

"Come on! The money gets moved to France and exchanged for euros, you can make ten times your investment." He pulled a briefcase from under the table and opened it, revealing banded stacks of British pound notes. "Look at them! Every one's perfect. I have another investor lined up for this run. If I cut him out in favor of you I still have to come up with a hundred thousand somehow."

"What about you, Vince?" Nick wondered. "What do you get out of this?"

"We've made three deliveries so far and it's been very profitable. But I've been putting the money back into the business. That's why I can't make up the shortfall. Costs are going up; our customers in France are getting greedy."

Mona turned to Nick. "What about it? Want to get in for my thirty thousand? It's not really costing you anything."

"Add twenty to it and you'll have as much as her," Bundy said. "That'll be a nice profit with no risk."

"What happens if they seize your shipment on the way?"

Bundy shrugged. "Then we do another. They can't trace it back to us."

"What do you think, Nick?" Mona asked. "You could give him the thirty thousand now and then maybe get an additional twenty."

Nick laughed. "My assets are in America, remember? It would take me at least till Saturday to have that much money wire-transferred to me here."

"I could give you that long," Bundy told him.

"It would be in American dollars."

"Fine with me."

Nick took the envelopes from his pocket. "All right, here's the thirty thousand pounds Mona paid me. How much more do you need in dollars?"

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"You'd better make it forty thousand. The pound is edging close to two dollars American these days."

They shook hands on it, and Mona left the meeting with Nick. "Bet you never thought your trip to England would end up like this."

"It's a surprise, all right. Are you sure we can trust him?"

"If he tries anything funny we just call the police. They find all the counterfeit money and he goes to prison for a good long time."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Will you go back to London now?"

Nick nodded. "I have to make arrangements for the wire transfer. Suppose I meet you back here at the dock on Saturday morning."

"At ten-thirty? Vince will be taking the first run then."

"Fine. I'll have the rest of my share with me."

After decades in his chosen profession, Nick had contacts in most large cities. Finding the people he needed in London was no problem. By the following evening he had a neat package of American money, four hundred one-hundred-dollar bills totaling forty thousand dollars. He took the train to Portsmouth and then crossed over to the Isle of Wight once more. Mona Walsh was waiting for him on the dock.

"Did you bring the money?" she asked.

"Right here. How about you?"

She nodded. "We're going to make a small fortune before this is over, Nick."

"I hope so."

They traveled on the steam railway to Wootton, where Vince Bundy was awaiting them. "You two drive a hard bargain. How about giving me back that five-pound note now?"

But Mona Walsh shook her head. "You don't get it till we receive our share of the money from France. This way, if you don't pay us I go straight to the police with that counterfeit note."

"Fair enough." He took the packet of American currency from Nick and fanned through it, making sure they were all hundreds. Then he did the same with Mona's British pounds. "This will pay for our expenses with the special paper and printing. All those security gizmos are expensive to duplicate. I'll be making the trip to France tonight and I should have your money by Monday. Suppose we meet right here at noon. If there's any delay I'll contact Mona on her cell phone."

"Fair enough," she told him. "We'll see you Monday. And don't forget I still have that counterfeit note."

Nick had to see how it would play out. When he phoned Gloria he said only that he'd tell her all about it when he got home. On Sunday night he paid a visit to the Berkeley Square casino but Mona was nowhere to be found. When he asked about her he was told

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she'd quit the job after a deranged man sprayed her with petrol. Nick wasn't surprised.

"Was her attacker ever apprehended?" he asked.

"Never caught him."

On Monday morning Nick took the catamaran across to the island. Vince Bundy was not on the steam locomotive or anywhere else. He saw the conductor, Josh Lydon, and asked about Bundy. The man simply shrugged. "Gone, I guess. Haven't seem him since last week. We're mostly volunteers, you know. People come and go. Vince had only worked here a few weeks. I think he was just a train buff."

"Didn't he work with you at the printer's?"

Lydon frowned. "No, I just knew him from here."

Later that day, as he awaited his flight home to New York, Nick made a phone call from Heathrow Airport.

The following morning over a late breakfast, Gloria showed him an item in the *Times*. "Look, Nicky, they arrested a couple of counterfeiters in London last night. Wasn't this Mona Walsh your client?"

"Yes, but nothing came of it. I didn't make a cent."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose it gave them a thrill to try a long con on someone like me." He told her what had happened.

"You mean they were conning you all along?"

Nick nodded. "It was Vince Bundy who sprayed Mona with the petrol outside the casino. That was for my benefit, to add some verisimilitude to her story. Of course when I met him he looked entirely different, with a false beard and a wig. The five-pound note looked so perfect because it was genuine. There never were any counterfeit pound notes, and nothing they could be arrested for. A lot of things made me suspicious of the whole deal. Mona went outside the casino that first night for a smoke, but the cigarette between her lips was unlit. She couldn't take a chance of really igniting the petrol. She told me she'd changed her cell phone number so Bundy couldn't call her, but then he told her he'd phone if there was a change in plans. And he knew about the attack on her at the casino, though she'd never told him in my presence. None of it added up, especially when they started asking me to invest money in their scheme."

"But if their money was real, how could they be arrested for counterfeiting?"

Nick smiled and sipped his coffee. "Well, I had to get some satisfaction out of this whole thing. Their British pounds were all real, but the forty thousand dollars I gave them was counterfeit. I obtained it from contacts in London, and hid a global positioning bug in the package so Scotland Yard wouldn't have any trouble finding them after I called in a tip." ●

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With the Rich, a Little Patience

by John Van Kirk

"Have you ever even lied to anybody? Did you ever just take something . . . you know, just because you wanted it? Christ, Little Ms. Perfect, did you ever do anything bad in your life?"

Nobody had ever spoken to Emily like that before, or nobody but her father, and he never would have asked those questions, but now, finally, secure in her seat on the train, her Christmas boxes tucked around her, she had time to think about what her boss was trying to tell her when he had called her into his office an hour before. "I'm not saying you have to have larceny in your heart," Wade had gone on, "but, my God, you have to want something, you have to have hunger. If you go on like this, you're going to give away everything we have."

The train gave its first soft lurch and Emily looked up to see a hugely pregnant woman in a threadbare red coat teetering toward the open seat next to her. She had that glow people say some pregnant women have, and Emily said to herself, *This is a beautiful woman, this is a beautiful pregnant woman steering her way toward me,* and she started clearing her parcels from the empty seat to make room, another act of generosity that Wade wouldn't approve of. Although she only saw Wade at work, she could easily imagine him on the train: He wouldn't invite this girl, for as she drew closer she was revealed to be quite young, younger by ten

John Van Kirk teaches writing and literature at Marshall University in West Virginia. His short stories and essays have appeared in *The Hudson Review, The New York Times Magazine, West Branch,* and *Paragraph,* as well as in several anthologies. "Newark Job," his first published story, won an O. Henry Award in 1993. He makes his *EQMM* debut here with a Christmas story with an O. Henry-like twist at the end.

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years than Emily herself . . . Wade would never invite this girl to sit beside him; he would guard his space until he had no choice but to surrender it, and then he would manage to give it to a thin person who wouldn't encroach on his breathing room.

"Permiso. Gracias. Thank you," the young woman said as she settled herself and several shopping bags next to Emily.

"You're welcome," Emily said. *"De nada."*

"You speak Spanish? *¿Usted habla Español?"* the woman said.

"Yes. *Sí, sí, algo."*

Suddenly a torrent of rapid-fire Spanish poured from the young woman. Emily could just keep up. "Could you watch my things a moment?" the young woman asked. "I must find a bathroom," and she indicated her belly. "I can't go ten minutes these days."

Ill at ease with the responsibility of guarding the young woman's possessions, but unable to say no, Emily stretched her arm across the seat next to her, and tried to extend her sense of property over all that it contained. The train had pulled out of the station, and was lumbering through the dark underground passageways that led out of the city. Emily could remember riding through these tunnels as a little girl, at once frightened and fascinated by the lights that would surge out of the shadows, wheel around, and vanish, roaring. Red taillights glinted from silvery tracks. The murmur of her parents' voices comforted her from the distant past.

"Ai, gracias de nuevo."

The young woman was back, shifting packages and maneuvering herself into the seat.

"Esta bien," Emily said.

"Soy Emilia," the woman said, extending her hand and smiling not just with her mouth, but with her eyes as well. She smelled like cornmeal.

"Emilia? Yo soy Emily. Tenemos el mismo nombre." We have the same name.

And somehow, faster and more easily than she could have expected, she found herself in a conversation . . . in Spanish. As she listened to the young woman, and found herself responding, she marveled at how readily the language, which she hadn't practiced in years other than in the occasional brief interchange with a Hispanic waiter or salesperson, came back to her. They spoke of the weather—as they burst from the tunnels the usually barren gravel railbeds of the old switching yards were beginning to be dusted with big flakes of snow. They spoke of the crowds and the rush to get home for Christmas. They began to speak of their families.

Emilia was from Guatemala. She had been in the U.S. for only a few months. Her husband had brought her and her mother up with the money he saved by working as a truckdriver, going back

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and forth across the country. They were renting a little house in the suburbs. It was pretty, but she still wasn't used to the cold, and her mother was feeling lonely for Guatemala. And she was cleaning everything in sight and cooking all this food as if a multitude would be coming for Christmas. Emilia had had to get out of the house or she would go crazy. So she took the train to the city. It was her first time alone, and she practically had to sneak out of the house. But when the baby came, she told Emily, then her mother would be all right, she was sure of that; once she had a little baby to help out with, to keep her occupied, she would be fine. And Emilia had found a beautiful present for her, too. She reached into one of her bags and pulled out a white cardboard gift box about the size of a pencil case, and opened it to show Emily. There, on a snowy bed of cotton, lay a bright necklace of shiny green and red stones set in a delicate silver filigree. Emily knew it couldn't have cost more than forty or fifty dollars, perhaps less, but it was tasteful and Christmassy, really quite beautiful. "Your mother will love it," she told Emilia.

And then, caught up in Emilia's enthusiasm, Emily blurted out that she, too, had bought her mother a necklace for Christmas. She felt embarrassed as soon as Emilia demanded to see it. But there was no denying this young woman, so exuberant with her two lives tucked into one body. Emily took the black case out of her purse, held it low in her lap, and snapped it open for Emilia's eyes only. Diamonds like stars and white gold like dripping icicles picked up the blue-gray light of the late afternoon sky, the yellowish light from the ceiling of the train car, and a bit of the red of Emilia's coat.

"Ai, Dios mío," Emilia said. What a marvel. "Oh, if I could give . . . if my mother . . . ah, your mother will love it."

"Oh yes," Emily heard herself reply, "I saw her admire it in a shop window just last year, and I have been making little payments on it every week," which was partly true. She had put it on layaway, and she had made fifty weekly payments of two hundred dollars each. She closed the box carefully and returned it to her purse.

"Your mother is very lucky," Emilia said, "to have such a generous daughter."

"Four daughters," Emily heard herself say, "and we all try to outdo one another, ever since we were girls together." There was something about saying all this in another language that made it possible for Emily to paint for Emilia the picture of an idyllic childhood with two older sisters and one cherished baby sister. She told her of the Christmases and birthdays, and how her mother would cook all day and make gifts by hand, but how happy it made all of them just to be together in those days. She told her how her father had struggled to send them all to college and how they didn't always have all the things their neighbors and friends had, but their house was always filled with laughter and love,

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especially the lively wit of her mother, a great joker, a tiny round woman who was always setting a place for other children at the table, as all of the girls would invite school friends to dinner, and later, during their college years, would even bring friends home to spend the holidays, not poor friends, or not always, but sometimes rich friends whose parents were off to Aspen or Switzerland or someplace remote and exotic where they went without their kids. "Oh, those rich people," Emily said.

"Sí," Emilia said, *"pues, dicen, 'Con los ricos, paciencia.'"* They say, "With the rich, a little patience." They have their troubles.

Emily looked at Emilia. She meant what she said. This lovely glowing pregnant woman from Guatemala, living with her mother far from the rest of their family, waiting to hear whether her hard-working husband would be able to make it home for Christmas, this woman was recommending sympathy for the rich. She thought again of Wade telling her she lacked the hunger to succeed in the business world, suggesting that she wasn't worth the wages, the first real money of her own, he paid her.

"I don't know," Emily told her. "I had one friend who stayed with us almost all the time; she couldn't stand her rich parents in those days. Now she works in New York trying to become just like them."

"Ai," Emilia said, arching her back and wincing. "I think he's standing on my bladder. Would you watch my things again?"

Emily took charge again of the bags. It was becoming dark, and she could see her own reflection in the window. She looked tired and sad. She watched the snow falling through the streetlights of the little towns along the route. A melancholy sense of futility took hold of her. So much was irrecoverable. Again she heard Wade's words in her ears: "Did you ever just take something just because you wanted it?" No. She hadn't. But she would, she resolved, she would.

She looked up to see Emilia wobbling back toward her seat, her face beaded with sweat from the exertion, her black hair sticking to her temples in curly little tendrils. And still she looked beautiful, radiant.

"It is the first time I have seen snow," Emilia told her as she lowered herself heavily into the seat. "I have seen it in pictures and in the movies, but I never really knew it would be so beautiful." For a moment, Emily actually saw the scene through the train window, the white blanket of snow on the ground, the Christmas lights on the houses, the falling snow under the night sky . . . she saw all this reflected in Emilia's eyes.

"I have to get off at the next stop," Emily said.

Emilia wished her a merry Christmas " . . . and blessings on your mother and all your sisters."

"Hello, Daddy," Emily said as she entered the warm foyer.

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"Hello, precious," her father said. "Did you have a good trip? Give me those bags, your coat—ah, here's Consuela."

A little round woman was coming down the stairs. *"Ai, bienvenida, mi amor,"* she sang out musically.

"Oh, Consuela," Emily said. *"Feliz Navidad. Como te he extrañado."* How I've missed you.

She set her bags on the floor and wrapped her arms around Consuela before shrugging out of her coat. "How is she?" she asked, looking from Consuela to her father and back again and seeing the look that passed between them before either would answer.

"She's about the same, dear," her father said, but the weariness in his voice told her that she was worse.

"She has good days and bad days," Consuela said. "Today is not so bad. I was just with her. She's awake. You go up and tell her Merry Christmas."

"Does she know you?" Emily asked, again of both her father and Consuela. "The last time I was here she didn't know me."

Her father didn't say anything.

"She will like to have a visitor," Consuela said. "You go up and see her."

A short while later Emily sat by the side of the hospital bed brought into the house for her mother. She held the older woman's dry right hand in hers. The table next to the bed was crowded with photographs in tasteful frames and stands—her slim, stylish mother and her handsome father in ski outfits at Vail and Bern, in formal wear at a fancy dress ball, in conical hats drinking champagne. Emily herself was only in one of the photos—a birthday shot taken in a restaurant when she was ten or eleven.

"It's Emily, Mother, your daughter," she said.

Her mother didn't speak, but looked at her with expressionless eyes.

"I know you don't remember me."

Emily reached out to dab her mother's mouth with a napkin.

"I learned something today," Emily said. "Wade—you don't remember him either, Daddy's old friend who's supposed to be teaching me how to cut throats—Wade thinks I need to learn how to lie, how to steal . . . he thinks I don't have the hunger it takes in his world, the world Daddy did so well in. But today I lied. And I stole. And I saw what I want."

Emily brought out her present. "It's Christmas Eve," she said. "I've brought you something."

She held the box up before her mother and opened it carefully, watching the unknowing eyes as they took in the black velvet lining and the box's contents. And suddenly her mother's left hand that had lain limp on the coverlet lifted and reached for the necklace, for the shiny green and red stones and the silver filigree. ●

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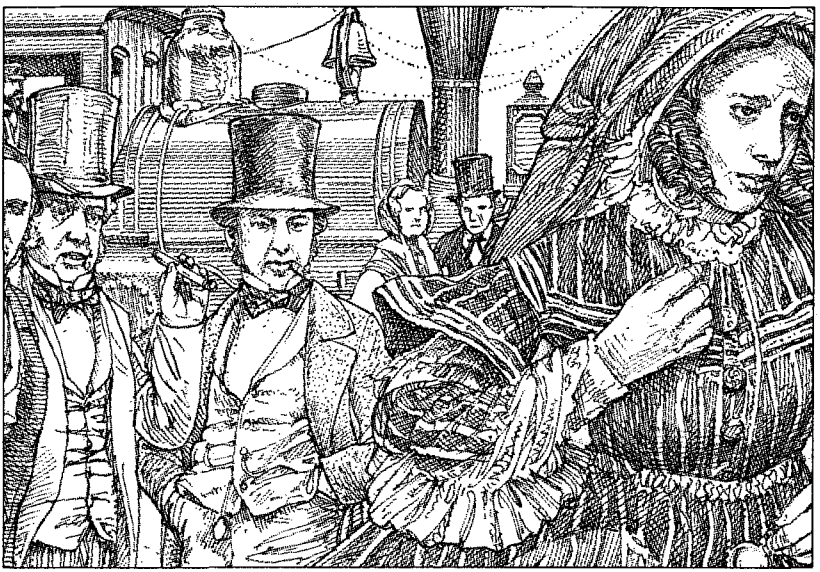

Art by Allen Davis

FINGERS TO THE BONE

by Andrew Taylor

1: The Arteries of Wealth

Robbie Trevine saw Mary Linnet before she saw him. She was standing under the archway, tucked in the angle between the wall and a trolley laden with corded boxes. She wore a dark cloak that belonged to her mother, and she had drawn up the hood, holding it across her face with her hand. Her fingers were white and thin, like bones.

Two trains had recently come in, one of them Robbie's, and people hurried through the archway to the city of Bristol beyond. He wriggled through a group of soldiers, arrogant in scarlet and gold, and touched her on the arm. She flinched and pulled away, jarring her shoulder on the wall. She glared at him as if he were a stranger.

"Mary, what is it? It's me."

"Creeping up like that! You scared the life out of me!"

"What are you doing? Collecting?"

"No." She looked away. "Not today."

Sometimes Mary collected money for the Rodney Place Missionary Society, though usually she took her box up the hill to Clifton

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or down to Queen's Square, where the pickings were better because the people were rich enough to afford to be generous. Sometimes she was sent further afield, to Bath or Chippenham or Swindon. The railways had made the world smaller, more manageable.

"So why are you here?" Robbie asked.

"Taking the air."

"Here? At Temple Meads?"

"Why not? The doctor brought a nurse, Mrs. Allardyce. She's sitting with Ma."

"How is she?"

"No better. Worse, if anything. And what are you doing here?"

"Tried for a job. Just digging, that was all. Foundations for a signal box. But they'd already—"

"Robbie," she cut in. "Go now, please. Go."

He gawped at her. "But why?"

A door had opened on the other side of the porter's trolley. A man laughed. A cloud of cigar smoke wafted through the air.

Mary gripped his arm. "Too late. Look at that notice. You don't know me."

"You've lost your wits."

"Just do as I say."

He turned away and pretended to study a notice concerning the transport of livestock on the Great Western Railway. The fact that he could read it all was due to Mary's mother. Several gentlemen emerged through the doorway. They exchanged farewells and most of them strolled through the archway to waiting carriages.

But two of the gentlemen lingered. Side by side, cigars in hand, they surveyed the seething crowds. Porters shouted and cursed. Trains murmured and hissed and rattled. The sounds rose to the high vault of the roof.

"Ten years ago this wasn't here, Sir John," said the younger and smaller of the two. "Twenty years ago it was barely conceivable. Thirty years ago it would have been beyond the wildest dreams of an opium eater."

"Impressive, I grant you," answered his companion, a white-haired gentleman of perhaps sixty years of age. "But the noise is intolerable."

"Noise? Yes, indeed. It's the sound that money makes. The Great

A two-time winner of the Ellis Peters Historical Dagger, Andrew Taylor was asked by the Brunel 200 organization to write a story in honor of the 200th birthday of Britain's greatest engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. This story, in which appear not only Brunel but Sir John Ruispidge (who also has a role in the 2004 Taylor novel *The American Boy*), was the result. Our issue containing the story goes on sale in '06, Brunel's anniversary year.

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Western Railway has restored prosperity to the towns it touches. Railways are the arteries of wealth. As you yourself will discover, I trust, when the Lydmouth and Borders Railway is built."

"You go too fast for me, sir."

"Because there is no time to waste!" cried the younger man, waving his cigar. "The fruit hangs ripening on the tree. If we do not pluck it, then someone else will. Which is why my directors and I are so desirous of your joining us on the board. Where Sir John Ruispidge leads, other men will follow. Your position in the county, sir, your influence with the administration, your friends in Parliament—you have it in your power to smooth our way considerably and, I may add, to reap a just reward for doing so. Once the line is built, you may transport your coal at a fraction of the price you now pay, and at many times the speed. The general prosperity the railways bring—the freer movement of people and capital—cannot but have a benevolent effect on the fortunes of all those concerned."

"Ah, but the investment must be considerable. Nothing will come of nothing, as the Bard tells us."

"I speak from experience. You must allow me to show you the figures from South Devon." There was another wave of the cigar. "And consider the convenience of it. You will be able to travel from your country seat to your house in town within a day, and in the utmost comfort. If Lady Ruispidge desires quails in aspic from Fortnum's, they could be on her table within a few hours."

"You are a persuasive advocate." Sir John took out his watch. "Alas, I must leave you until tomorrow."

"Good God! Is that a Breguet watch?"

"It is indeed. You have sharp eyes, Mr. Brunel."

Robbie's eyes swung towards the little man. The great Brunel himself!

"I trust I have a sharp eye for any piece of machinery so elegantly conceived and finely constructed as one of Monsieur Breguet's watches. But in this case I have a personal interest. My father sent me as a very young man to work for Monsieur Breguet in Paris. He told me there was no better person from whom I might learn what I needed."

Watch in hand, Ruispidge bowed. "Your father was indeed a man of perspicacity."

The watch was dangling on its chain from the old man's hand, swinging to and fro like a pendulum, coming perilously close to the wall. Mr. Brunel, Robbie thought, was growing agitated for the watch's safety.

At that moment, the world tilted on its axis and became an entirely different place. Mary came to life. His friend Mary, whom Robbie had known since he was a child in short-coats; who had played the part of sister to him for most of his life; who went to

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church at least once, usually twice, on Sundays—his friend Mary, with whom he was more than half in love—well, she picked up her cloak and skirt with her left hand and ran forward, keening like a madwoman.

She snatched the old man's watch from his hand. Sir John and Mr. Brunel froze, both with their cigars moving towards their open mouths. Mary dived into the crowded station yard, dodging among the carriages and horses and wagons until she was lost in the seething mass of humanity.

2: A Gown of Yellow Silk

Robbie Trevine lodged above a cobbler's near the market, where they let him sleep under the rafters in return for sweeping floors and running errands. By the time he had finished his jobs for the evening, the sky was darkening. He slipped out of the house and made his way to Hotwells, to the damp and crowded house by the river where Mary and her mother lodged in a tiny room up four pairs of stairs.

Mary opened the door. When she saw him, she stepped back to allow him into the room. He glanced towards the curtained alcove beside the empty fireplace.

"She's asleep," Mary whispered. "The doctor gave her something."

"Give my love when she wakes."

Robbie reckoned that Mrs. Linnet had given him more love than his own mother, though that wasn't hard because, when he was three years old, his mother had gone off for a few days' holiday with a Liverpool publican and never come back.

Mary's face was impossible to read in that shadowy room. "I was afraid you'd come."

"Why did you do it? Why did you steal the gent's watch at the station?"

"I had to do something. The doctor don't come cheap, and Ma needs medicines, and proper food. The nurse is coming back later this evening. It all costs money."

"But if they catch you—"

"They won't."

"But selling something stolen is almost as risky as taking it in the first place."

She shrugged and turned her head away from him. "There's someone I know."

"This isn't the first time, is it?"

Mary said nothing. They listened to the breathing of the sick woman.

Robbie said: "I'd do anything to help. You know that."

"Go now," she said. "Just go. I don't want you here."

Robbie stumbled out of the room. He crossed the street and took

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shelter in the mouth of the alley on the other side. There was a tavern on the corner, and the constant bustle of the place made him almost invisible.

A distant church clock chimed the quarters and the hours. He calculated that he waited nearly an hour and a half before Mary appeared in the doorway of her house. She was hooded and cloaked as before, but he would have known her anywhere. She set off up the street, her wooden pattens clacking on the cobbles. He followed her, holding well back, keeping to patches of shadow and varying his pace. Soon they began to climb towards the dark mass of Clifton Wood.

Mary followed the rising ground towards the Downs in the northwest. They were not far from the tower of Brunel's unfinished suspension bridge, looming over the Gorge and the river Avon. Before she reached the Downs, however, Mary turned into a terrace of great stone-faced houses set back from the road. Only one of the houses had shuttered windows, and this was the one she approached. Robbie, watching from across the street, saw her dark figure descending into the basement area in front of the house.

He crossed the road. A plate had been screwed to one of the gateposts. It was too dark to decipher the words engraved upon it. He ran his fingertips over the brass, tracing the cold metallic channels of each letter.

THE RODNEY PLACE MISSIONARY SOCIETY

Mary knocked on the basement door. A candle flame flickered in the black glass of a nearby window. Bolts scraped back. The door opened.

"Child," said Mr. Fanmole in his soft voice. "You are long past your time."

"I beg pardon, sir. The nurse was late and I couldn't leave my mother."

When she was inside, Mr. Fanmole closed and bolted the door. He wore a long grey dressing gown of a silken material that gleamed in the candlelight; his little head was perched on a broad neck that rose from narrow shoulders.

"Come, child." He led the way along a whitewashed passage vaulted with brick, his shadow cavorting behind him on the wall. "You saw him?"

"Yes, sir. He came out with the other gents, and then he stopped for a while and talked with one of them. Mr. Brunel himself."

She followed Mr. Fanmole into a room at the back of the house. A coal fire burned in the grate and there were shutters across the two windows. He sat down at a mahogany table laden with papers and angled his chair to face the fire. He beckoned her to stand before him.

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"Well, child? What did you learn?"

"He's interested in a new railway, but he hasn't made up his mind. He's lodging at the Great Western Hotel. And . . . and I took his watch."

Mr. Fanmole slapped the palm of his hand on the table, and his pen fell unnoticed to the carpet. "I told you to be discreet, you little fool. This was not an occasion for thieving."

"But he was playing with it, sir, just asking for it to be prigged. And my ma, she's took bad again, and she needs a nurse as well as a doctor—and it's a good watch, too, sir. You give me a sovereign for the last one, and I'm sure—"

"Hold your prattle."

"Sir, he didn't see my face, I swear it. And I was away through the crowd before he knew the watch was gone."

"Give it me," he commanded.

Mr. Fanmole held out his hand and she dropped the watch onto his palm. To her surprise he smiled. "Ah! He will be enraged. He's deeply attached to his Breguet timepiece."

"Sir," she asked timidly, "how much will I have when you sell it? My mother—"

"It's too precious to sell, child. Far too precious."

"But, sir, I don't understand."

He gazed at her, whistling tunelessly, and put down the watch, very gently, on the table. "You don't have to understand."

"I—I thought you'd be pleased, sir."

Suddenly he was on his feet and looming over her. His hand shot out and seized her by the hair. He dragged her to a tall cupboard built into the wall on the right of the fireplace. He opened the door. Hanging inside was a yellow silk gown.

"This is how to please me, child."

3: Not Quite the Gentleman

In the opinion of Sir John Ruispidge, Mr. Brunel was not quite the gentleman. But it would be churlish to deny that he had been kindness itself after the distressing theft of the Breguet watch at Temple Meads Station. He had summoned police officers and urged them to prosecute their enquiries with the utmost vigour. He had ordered advertisements to be placed in the Bristol papers, offering a reward of twenty guineas for the watch's safe return.

"Not for the world, my dear sir," he had said, "would I have had such an incident occur."

Sir John could well believe it. The long and the short of it was that Brunel had every reason to keep him sweet.

That evening he dined in Queen Square with two men who might become fellow directors if he decided to accept Brunel's overtures. Still shaken by his experience, he drank deep and left early. The loss of his watch had been a double blow—first the

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watch itself, which he cherished, and second the circumstances of its theft. As an old soldier, Sir John prided himself on being a man of action, always prepared for the unexpected. But he had not even tried to apprehend the young person. He had behaved, in short, like a milksop.

But he would not be caught unprepared again. As the carriage whirled him back to his hotel near the Cathedral, Sir John patted the pocket of his overcoat and felt the reassuring outline of his Adams revolver. Only recently patented, it was a double-action model enabling rapid fire; according to his gunsmith, its bullet would stop a charging tiger.

The carriage drew up outside the hotel. A servant let down the steps and opened the door. As he climbed down, Sir John stumbled, and would have fallen if the man had not steadied him. He was perhaps a trifle bosky, but he prided himself on being a man who could hold his liquor. There might even be a case for a little brandy to aid digestion before he retired.

His apartments were on the first floor. He opened the sitting-room door and discovered that the people of the house had forgotten to bring lights and make up the fire. He marched towards the fireplace, intending to ring for a servant.

But something stopped him in his tracks, something amiss. There was a perfume in the air, clearly identifiable despite the underlying smell of his cigars. He acted without conscious thought. He pulled the heavy revolver from his pocket. Simultaneously he glimpsed a shadow shifting on the far side of the room.

The revolver went off with a crash that stunned him, the echoes almost masking the sound of scuffling and a cry and the closing of the door to the bedroom next to the sitting room. He was so surprised he nearly dropped the gun. He had not intended to shoot; he had forgotten that the Adams revolver was self-cocking and lacked a safety catch.

"Stop, thief!" Sir John cried, and the words came out little better than a whimper.

He moved unsteadily to the connecting door and flung it open. The bedroom appeared to be empty. A second door, leading directly to the corridor, stood open; the corridor was empty, too.

Trembling, Sir John returned to the bedroom and tugged the bell rope so hard it came away in his hand. As he looked about him for the brandy decanter, a piece of material on the carpet caught his eye. He picked it up and examined it under the light.

It was a scrap of yellow silk.

During the following day, Robbie earned a few coppers helping a stall holder at the market. Everyone was talking about the burglar at the Great Western Hotel, and how an old gent had put a

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bullet in him. When Robbie got back to his lodgings, the cobbler called out to him from his workshop.

"There's a woman asking after you. That nurse, Mrs. Allardyce. She said you was to go over to Mrs. Linnet's. But first things first. I need a dozen tallow candles from Hornby's. If you look sharp you'll catch them before they close."

Robbie ignored the order, just as he ignored the shout that pursued him up the street. He ran all the way to Hotwells. The house where the Linnets lodged was full of lights and noise but their window was dark. He climbed the stairs and tapped on the door. There was no answer. He turned the handle and went inside the room. The air made him gag.

"Mrs. Linnet? Mary?"

"Robbie?" Mary's mother whispered from the alcove near the fireplace. "Is that you?"

"Yes. Shall I light the lamp?"

He blundered through the darkness and found the oil lamp and a box of matches on the mantel. Mrs. Linnet's face appeared in the wavering light. She was lying on her pallet, huddled under a mound of blankets.

"What's happened? Where's Mary?"

"She didn't come back last night. Mrs. Allardyce stayed till morning but then she had to go."

"Is she coming to sit with you tonight?"

The head rolled on the pillow. "No. I can't pay her. Mary said she'd bring some money. Where is she, Robbie? I'm worried."

"I'll find her. Did she go out again last night?"

"Again? What do you mean? She went out once, and she never came back."

Mary Linnet was on fire. Her lips were chapped and she felt as though her skin was flaking away. Her tongue lay huge and dry in her mouth. She was aware of the pain in her left shoulder. There was moisture, too, dark and thick and tasting of iron.

She did not know how long she had lain in this dark place, drifting in and out of consciousness. Once, in the glow of a candle, the Reverend Mr. Fanmole loomed over her like a great grey slug in a dressing gown. She remembered Mr. Fanmole waiting for her with a closed carriage when she had stumbled through the side door of the hotel. She remembered his hot breath on her cheek, and how he had made her lie on the carriage floor as they jolted up the hill to Clifton.

"Don't sit on the seat, you stupid child, you'll bleed on the leather."

Now Mary was lying on a thin layer of straw spread over a flagged floor with a mound of logs in the corner. A barred window was set high in a wall. Sometimes there was natural light on the

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other side of it—not much, but enough to see the outlines of her prison.

But perhaps that was a hallucination, too. She could no longer distinguish between what was inside her mind and what was without. Once she saw the Breguet watch swinging like a pendulum before her eyes, measuring away her life.

Another time she saw as clear as day Robbie's face framed by the little window. He tapped on the glass with fingers that were pale as bones, and she opened her mouth to call him, but she could no more speak than she could move.

4: A Tribe of One

On the second evening of his visit, Sir John Ruispidge dined at the Great Western Hotel. After his adventure the previous evening, he was pleased to discover that he was regarded as something of a hero. The story had already reached the newspapers—how a distinguished visitor to Bristol had surprised a burglar in his room and coolly put a bullet through the scoundrel. The villain had not yet been apprehended, but traces of blood had been found.

Returning to his rooms after dinner, Sir John passed through the lobby of the hotel. A young man was engaged in an altercation with two of the hotel servants.

"I'm not going," the man was saying in a strong Bristol accent. "Not till I've seen him."

"You'll be pitched out on your ear. I'll summon a constable."

To judge by his clothes, the young man belonged to the labouring class, but he looked clean and respectable. He had a pleasant, manly face, Sir John considered, and he appeared sober. To the baronet's surprise, the fellow pointed at him.

"Why, there he is! Sir John, sir, let me speak to you."

"What is it, my man? Who are you?"

The man pulled off his cap. "Robbie Trevine, sir, at your service. It's—it's about your watch. And what happened last night."

Sir John frowned. "The burglar? What had he to do with my watch? It was stolen hours earlier."

"I know, sir. If you'd let me explain?"

"Come over here."

Sir John led the way to a sofa near the fire. He sat down and the man stood cap in hand before him. The servants hovered but kept their distance.

"The watch was stolen by a young woman I know," Trevine said.

Sir John's eyebrows rose. It had not been given out that the thief was a woman. "Go on."

"She's not a thief, sir, I swear it, not by nature. Her mother's ill, and she can't pay for the doctor."

Sir John waved a hand. "Right is right, Trevine, and wrong is wrong. Nothing can alter that."

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Trevine's lips tightened. "Yes, sir."

"Do you know where she is now?"

Trevine nodded.

"Then I'm obliged to you. If this results in an arrest and the recovery of my watch, I shall see that you receive the reward. Tell me where to find her and leave your direction with—"

"I don't want your reward."

"What?"

Trevine lowered his voice. "She's wounded, sir. I saw her through a window not an hour ago, lying in a yellow dress like a street-walker's. There's blood on her, all over the place. Maybe someone shot her."

"Stuff and nonsense."

"Yes, sir."

Sir John glanced at the servants, making sure they were still out of earshot. He remembered the scrap of yellow silk he had found on his bedroom floor. "And—and where precisely is she?"

"If I tell you, you'll help her, sir?"

"I make no promises." Sir John wished he had not described his burglar to the authorities as "a hulking great brute." "But I'm not a vengeful man. If this young woman can procure the return of my watch, I shall be content to let sleeping dogs lie. But first things first. Where is she?"

"In Clifton, sir—up near the Downs where they're building the new bridge. Rodney Place."

"What number?"

"I don't know, sir. But it's where the Missionary Society is. Mr. Fanmole's house."

Sir John slumped back in his chair as though flicked by an invisible finger. The air rushed from his lungs. "Fanmole?"

Trevine looked at him in astonishment. "Yes, sir. A reverend gentleman."

"Little fellow with a fat neck? Slimy voice and a laugh like a hacksaw?"

"That's him to the life, sir."

Sir John stood up. "Damme, I see it all now." He waved to the nearest servant. "You there! Whistle up a hackney carriage." He turned back to Robbie Trevine. "Wait—I must fetch something. Then we'll see what Mr. Fanmole has to say."

When he came back to the lobby, he was wearing a hat and a big overcoat and swinging what looked like a weighted walking stick. He swept Robbie into the hackney carriage at the hotel door and they rattled up the hill to Clifton. Sir John talked as they drove—he would have talked to anyone; he was as full of pressure as a GWR Northern Star locomotive.

"That damned rogue Fanmole! My brother gave him one of our livings just before he died. But it didn't take long for the rumours

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to start. Tittle-tattle about the village girls. Then the mother of one of my tenants died, turned out she'd just altered her will in Fanmole's favour. Next thing I knew, he'd invested some money on behalf of his curate, and the money was lost; and the poor fellow blew out his brains; and guess who owned the company? Fanmole's aunt, or some such. I could have taken him to court, but the scandal would have looked bad. So I made him resign the living, and I had a quiet word with the bishop, too."

"Mary says it's his aunt's house in Rodney Place," Robbie said.

"And what does the aunt say about her precious nephew, eh?"

"If she does any talking, sir, no one's taking much notice. She's in a private asylum in Totterdown. But he runs his Missionary Society from her house."

"For the benefit of the heathen, eh? A tribe of one, I'll be bound, and its name is Fanmole. Any servants?"

"None that live in, I believe."

The hackney carriage drew up in Rodney Place. Sir John told the driver to wait, stormed up the steps, and hammered on the door. A moment later, bolts scraped from their sockets, and the door opened.

Fanmole blinked up at them. "Why such unseemly noise, my dear sir? In any case, the Society is closed until the morning."

Sir John thrust his stick into the doorway. "You blackguard."

He shouldered his way into the house with Robbie at his heels. Fanmole gave ground before them, retreating up the dimly lit hallway.

"Where's my watch? Where's that unfortunate girl?"

"The girl you shot, Sir John?" Fanmole said. "Who now lies at death's door? She came to me for help, and I gave her shelter. She is a common prostitute by the look of her, but no doubt that was part of her charm for you. I wonder what Lady Ruispidge will say when she hears that you consort with common sluts and then murder them."

5: Nothing Begets Nothing

In the hall of the house in Rodney Place, Robbie said quietly, "You lie. Mary's no slut."

Fanmole's eyes flicked towards him and then returned to Sir John. "I assure you, sir, the girl is a prostitute, and a thief besides. I found a watch in her pocket when I was tending her, and I cannot believe she came by it honestly. I have prayed for her. *Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.* Luke, chapter fifteen."

"If she's a thief," Robbie said, "it is because you made her steal."

"Take us to her," Sir John demanded. "Let the girl put her side of the matter."

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"You are not master here," Fanmole said with his harsh laugh.

Sir John pulled a revolver from his pocket. "I've not come here to argue with you."

Fanmole shrugged. He picked up a candlestick from the hall table and led the way through a green baize door. With their shadows dancing beside them on the whitewashed wall, they descended a flight of stairs and reached a passage running from front to back of the house.

"She's in a wood store," Robbie said. "Lying on the floor without even a blanket."

"She was feverish," Fanmole said over his shoulder. "She could not abide to be covered. The wood store was convenient since it is near the office where I conduct the business of the Missionary Society. Ah—here we are."

At that moment the candle went out, and total darkness enveloped them. There was the sound of a blow. Sir John cried out. Hobnails scraped on stone. Something clattered to the floor. Robbie blundered into a wall.

A match scraped; a flame flared. Mr. Fanmole had the pistol in his hand. Keeping his eyes on Robbie, he lit the candle, which was now standing on a narrow shelf near a door at the back of the house. Sir John lay motionless on the floor, and there were streaks of blood in his silver hair.

"You've killed him."

"I doubt it," Fanmole said. "I hit him with the candlestick but I used no more than reasonable force. You are my witness. He threatened me in my own house with a stick and a pistol. But let us be charitable. Age has infirmities of the mind as well as those of the body." The barrel of the gun swung from Sir John to Robbie himself. "And what would a court make of your role in this, young man? Much depends on how you act now. Our first step must be to restrain this poor gentleman before he does any more damage. Open the back door. You will find the wood store beyond. He might as well cool his heels in there, along with his young woman. And you shall keep him company."

A revolver is a powerful argument. Robbie did as Fanmole had told him. The back door led to a basement area containing the wood store. Robbie unbolted the door, conscious all the while of Fanmole behind him. Light from the candle spilled across the floor. There was no sign of Mary near the heap of logs.

"Take Sir John's legs," Fanmole said.

Robbie turned back. At that instant he saw Mary, standing by the doorway in her bloodstained yellow dress, her face as pale as wax. She held a finger to her lips. In her other hand was a hatchet.

"Hurry, damn you," Fanmole urged.

Robbie bent down and took the old man by the ankles. He

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dragged him slowly into the wood store. Fanmole advanced slowly, the revolver in his right hand. He reached the doorway and gripped the jamb with his free hand.

"Where's the slut gone?" he cried.

Robbie felt the air shift by his ear. There was a thud. Fanmole screamed. The revolver fell to the floor. Robbie saw the muzzle flash before he heard the crash of the shot. Mary fell backwards onto the logs. Fanmole danced with pain, blood spurting from his left hand, flashes of bone where the tips of two of his fingers had been.

As the echoes of the shot subsided, another sound forced its way down from the house above them: the pounding of the knocker on the front door.

Fanmole raised his head. His nostrils flared.

"The police," Robbie said. "They've come for you."

Fanmole ran up the steps to the garden at the back of the house. Robbie snatched up Sir John's weighted stick and set off after him. With surprising agility, the little clergyman darted down the garden. The distant hammering continued. Fanmole unbolted a gate and slipped into the cobbled alley beyond. Robbie followed the running footsteps. Once, when they passed the lighted windows of a tavern, Fanmole looked back. His pale features were contorted with pain and effort, the face reduced to something slimy and inhuman, a creature of nightmare.

They ran through Sion Place and burst into the open. On the crest of the Downs, the Observatory was a black stump against the paler darkness of the night sky. Fanmole veered to the left, towards the edge of the Avon Gorge.

"Stop!" Robbie cried, but the wind snatched away his words.

The clergyman ran towards Brunel's unbuilt bridge. Within a stone's throw of the Clifton tower, he stopped. His breath came in ragged gasps.

"Leave me." He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and pulled out something that glittered faintly. "Take this, Sir John's Breguet watch. Sell it or claim the reward. Just go. Say I gave you the slip in the dark."

Robbie did not reply. The memory of Mary filled his mind, and the bloody stain spreading over the yellow silk dress. He moved slowly towards the clergyman. Fanmole clambered on the low wall around the abutment on which the tower stood, intending to drop down to the little footpath beneath. But Robbie's advance made him change his mind and retreat along the parapet of the wall.

"No," he said, flapping his hand as though waving Robbie away. "Pray leave me. I have valuables concealed in a place nearby. I shall tell you where to find them."

He held out the watch. Robbie stepped forward and snatched it. But Fanmole jerked backwards immediately afterwards. By now

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he was on the corner of the wall, where it swung through ninety degrees to run parallel with the river more than 200 feet below.

"Watch out," Robbie shouted.

But the clergyman's hunched figure was still moving backwards. His left leg stepped into nothing.

Nothing begets nothing, as my mother used to say, Robbie thought.

Fanmole toppled out of sight. Branches snapped and crackled as he tumbled down the steep slope. He cried out only once. Then came a moment's utter silence.

At last there was a thud: and another, longer silence, this time as long as the century.

6: Postscriptum

Clearland Court
Lydmouth
23rd January

My Dear Brunel,

You will have heard from my solicitor that I have decided to accede to your request: I hope it will not be too many years before the Great Western Railway will bring you to Lydmouth.

As to that other business, I cannot tell you how glad I am that the girl, Mary Linnet, is no longer at death's door. Without her intervention in Rodney Place, I might not have survived to write this letter. Both she and her mother are now on the road to recovery and I shall find them respectable employment when their health is restored.

It was fortunate that, with the obstinacy of his breed, my hackney driver chose to pound on the door to demand his fare. Trevine tells me that Fanmole believed the knocking heralded the arrival of the constabulary, and that this precipitated his fatal decision to flee.

I am informed that goods worth several thousand pounds were found in the shed which Fanmole rented by the Gorge. It appears that the work of his so-called Missionary Society among the poor allowed him to recruit weak-minded young people, such as Mary Linnet, and set them to thieving and other mischief on his behalf in Bristol and neighbouring towns. (So you see, my dear sir, the railway is not an unmitigated blessing!)

But Fanmole's desire to have revenge on me proved his undoing. When he saw my arrival in Bristol announced in the newspapers, he sent the girl to discover where I was staying; she was then to take hold of me when I returned to the room, ring the bell, and complain vigorously that I had assaulted her! His design was to destroy my reputation as, he believed, I had destroyed his.

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As you know, the matter turned out very differently: and this was in great part due to the young man Robert Trevine, who returned my late brother's watch to me. He appears honest; he can even read and write. I offered to find him a situation on one of my estates—but no! the fellow wants nothing better than to stay in Bristol or its environs and work for you in some capacity on the Great Western Railway! It is true he shows some mechanical aptitude, but I fancy that the presence in the city of a certain young woman may have something to do with it. In any event, I should be very grateful if you could find him a position.

I am, sir, yours very truly,

J. Ruispidge

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

THE ROYALS OF SAN MARCO HIGH

by Jodi Tamara Harrison

So you're recording this now? No, I do not want my mom here. She'd be all, Ashley, you snuck out? Ashley, why aren't you in school? I mean, sure, one of my best friends was just murdered, but that doesn't mean my mom would be okay with me skipping school. Can't I just tell you what I know? If I help you figure out who killed Chelsey, then you can help me explain to my mom why I'm at the police station instead of in math class. Okay?

Jodi Harrison has been writing stories, poems, and songs since she was six, but up till now she has shared them only with family and friends. She is a lawyer, and currently lives and works in North Carolina, though she confesses that her heart remains in the lake country of northwest Montana where she was born and raised.

Okay. The four of us all go to San Marco High—Lauren and Chelsey and Madison and me. We are, like, the royalty of San Marco High. You're probably going, love yourself much? but I'm not saying we call ourselves that. That's what everybody else calls us—the Royals. Not the teachers but, you know, everybody who counts. People watch us and listen to us. And some of the other girls really, really hate us. They say some really mean stuff behind our backs, but never to our faces, because if we cut you dead you are *dead* at school. Life can't suck much worse than being on our shit list. But the list is totally short! Because like our Current Affairs teacher, Mr. Addison, says, if you have power, you have to use it responsibly.

So, anyway, the four of us are totally close. We hang out together and eat lunch together—nobody sits at our table without an invitation. We call each other and decide what we're going to wear and how we'll do our hair. Mostly Chelsey does that because she's so

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totally into fashion. Was, I mean. And we date the best guys, like the varsity football players and the guys on the water polo team—who are totally *built*—but we never steal guys from each other because we're friends and friends don't do that.

It's weird, people think we're all the same and at the same time they think we're all different, and neither of those is right. What I mean is, everyone thinks we're all the same just because we wear the same styles and live in the same neighborhood and are all really popular, but we're not really that much alike. And then people stick us in these different roles, like we're the Powerpuff Girls or something, and that's not right either. Like, I'm the Smart One, just because I get good grades and actually take honors classes, but I don't think I'm that much smarter than the other girls, I just—I like school. I'm totally not supposed to admit that, but it's the truth. Madison is the Shy One, except she really isn't, she just doesn't like to talk to people, except guys, and then she sort of looks up at them through her hair and they're like, man, she is so cute and *shy,* but she isn't, she's just reeling them in, you know? Same thing with Chelsey—she's supposed to be the Nice One 'cause she talks to everyone, but it isn't like it's that hard to say hi to people in the halls. But if you really piss her off? She will make you pay for it big time. Like I borrowed this Donna Karan sweater of hers one time? I snagged it getting out of Josh Miner's Miata but it was totally an accident and I was like, I'm really sorry and I'll buy you a new one, which I did, but she still didn't speak to me for, like, three weeks. Which kind of pissed me off, you know? So then I was all, I don't need to talk to her either if she's going to be such a bitch, but Lauren was like, both of you just get over it. Lauren's role is the Leader and, yeah, I guess that's accurate. But I think she's in charge because the rest of us don't really care about making the plans and basically driving the bus, and she likes to do it. It's not like she's got Stellar Leadership Qualities, though I'm actually kind of impressed she thought of this. Though maybe Tanner thought of it. I know he must be sort of smart since now he's Mister "Going to West Point," but he totally cheated on the U.S. Government exam, so it's not like you can tell how smart he is by the grades he gets. That really pissed me off—because I *studied* for that test! And I got an A, of course, but *on my own,* but he got an A because he assists Mrs. Chelmiak in our Government class and has access to her desk, and he totally stole the answer key and photocopied it. And then? After the test? He was totally waving the answer key around and telling people he had it, which is majorly not smart, until Chelsey took it away from him and stuffed it in her backpack and told him not to be an idiot.

So anyway. Where was I? Oh yeah. The other thing you need to know is that the Royals all live in the same neighborhood. Because we live pretty close together, our parents all know each

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other and so stuff gets kind of connected between us, you know? Like Chelsey's dad put in a security system with codes and stuff because he heard from Madison's dad that a house got broken into on their street. And then he totally drilled into Chelsey that you have to set the system *every time you leave the house* and he must have told her, like, a zillion times, until Chelsey was all, hey, Madison, tell your dad thanks from me. Madison was like, whatever, because that's just how parents are—overkill, you know? Then Lauren and Chelsey live right next-door to each other, and Chelsey goes over to Lauren's house to use the pool a lot because Chelsey doesn't have a pool. And Lauren's pool? When her parents re-did the backyard and put it in, they threw this humongous pool party and the whole neighborhood came, including all our families. And everyone was like, ooh, it's so *fabulous,* even though the pool area is *not* fabulous, it's pretty much the most bizarre thing you've ever seen—it's done up like you're in India or something, with fake torches and big woven fans and loud fabrics on the furniture and even a big freaking cement elephant in the corner of the patio. But the worst part of it is that spaced out along the pool are these four skinny pillars and on top of each is a granite monkey bigger than a football. One has its hands over its eyes, one has its hands over its ears, one has its hands over its mouth, and one's making this awful frowny face. My mom said that they mean "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil, have no fun," and that people thought those kind of monkeys were really hilarious, like, a zillion years ago. I told her I didn't get it; I just thought they were ugly. Ashley, she said, those monkeys are proof money doesn't buy taste. And as much as I hate to agree with my mom, she's totally right.

Anyway, like I said, our families are pretty connected. Like Chelsey's mom and my mom do yoga together, and Madison's parents and Lauren's parents play bridge together on Saturdays, and our housekeeper, Lupe, is the sister of Chelsey's housekeeper, Consuelo. They're both from Guatemala. Lupe and Consuelo, I mean. My mom was telling Chelsey's mom about what a *treasure* Lupe is, and Chelsey's mom was all, *I'm* looking for a housekeeper, and my mom was all, Lupe has a *sister*—you get the picture.

Okay. So last weekend? Friday night I snuck out and the girls and I went to this party that Mercedes Pearson was throwing. Mercedes is not really the Royals' type but her brother is a freshman at the university and a bunch of his friends were supposed to be there, so we went. We were all hoping to meet some college guys, except Chelsey, who claimed she wasn't interested because she's dating Tanner. Was dating him, I mean. She's all, no college boy can compete, and we were all, *as if!* Because Tanner may be going to West Point next fall, but he's just high school now and he is *not* all that compared to a college guy. There's no denying Tanner was the catch of the school when he moved here last fall—

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clearly the leader of all the guys who are fit to date. You'd think he'd have dated Lauren, but no—he's been with Chelsey since almost the day he got here. And I totally think Lauren would have loved to have him instead—she's the Queen, you know, so she should date the King—but I don't think any of us thought that was an issue because we don't steal guys, like I said.

Anyway, this party was totally lame. It ended up that it wasn't even at Mercedes' house, it was just some booze-fest out at a quarry west of town. Now, come on—the Royals at a quarry? Sitting around on rocks? Madison and I were totally like, let's just go, but I guess Lauren and Chelsey were having fun because pretty soon it's, like, four hours later. And Madison and I were like, let's *go,* this party *sucks.* And then two things happened: First, Lauren got really cold because she didn't wear anything over her Juicy spaghetti-strap top, and second, Chelsey got really drunk on Jägermeister and really, really had to go home. But Tanner couldn't take her home because she'd told her mom she was out with me. So Madison took Chelsey and me home but Chelsey left her green leather bomber jacket with Lauren 'cause Lauren was staying and Lauren was cold. And that green leather? It is totally Chelsey's favorite jacket. I called her the next day and she was kind of ticked because Lauren said she had left the jacket in Tanner's Jeep. And Chelsey was all, what was Lauren doing in Tanner's Jeep, and how come she didn't take care of my coat? And I was all, relax, he probably gave her a ride home, since she didn't come home with us. But Chelsey was really more ticked that Lauren had forgotten her stupid jacket. So I go, Tanner has it, it's not like it's lost, so just chill, okay? And she said, yeah, Tanner said he'd bring it the next time he comes by. Then I told her about how my mom was making me go with her to visit my grandma in Lorna Vista, which was going to be *beyond* boring, plus it was way too hot for driving, unless it was to the beach or something. Chelsey said, yeah, her parents were going up to Mendocino to see some gallery a friend of theirs was opening and she was supposed to go with them, but she was pretty hung over so she didn't think she was going to go. I said I wished I could stay home, but it's not like you can get out of visiting your grandma. I tried; I asked my mom if I could stay home instead and she said, if I have to go see her then so do you. So I told Chelsey I'd probably talk to her Sunday or for sure see her in school on Monday, and that was it. That was the last time I talked to her.

After that, I remember I went downstairs and Lupe was just coming in with some bags from Wal-Mart, because Saturday is one of her days off and she and Consuelo had been shopping. I love Lupe and we totally get along great, so she was showing me these new shoes she got at Wal-Mart. They were these beige low-heel sandals and she was talking about what a bargain they were and I was thinking thank *God* I don't have to shop at Wal-Mart and

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wear ugly shoes like those. But I totally did *not* say that because I would *never* be mean to Lupe and she thought they were great and a total bargain. Consuelo got a pair, too. They were on sale because the sizes were so small—Lupe and Consuelo have little feet because they're Guatemalan. Not that you have to be Guatemalan to have little feet; Chelsey has little feet, too, and she's not Guatemalan. But anyway, these shoes were, like, extra small and on clearance so they both got a pair, and Lupe is all, isn't this great? and I was all, yeah, that's really great, oh, they're really nice. Then Lupe went up to her room and my mom made me get in the car and go to Lorna Vista, so that blew the rest of my Saturday and most of Sunday, too.

Then, you know, it was all over the news when we got home on Sunday. I was up in my room doing my nails and my mom goes, Ashley! Ashley! Come down here! Usually I ignore her but she sounded all weird so I went downstairs. She had the news on and this helmet-haired woman reporter was standing in front of Chelsey's house with a microphone and talking super-seriously about the tragic death of some girl who had been found in this really skeevy neighborhood over on the east side with her head smashed in. At first I didn't get it. I'm thinking, why is she standing outside Chelsey's house? But then my mom grabbed my hand and put her other hand over her mouth and I realized—they must be talking about Chelsey. Because she doesn't have any sisters, you know? Didn't, I mean.

So then Helmet Head was talking to Chelsey's mom, who was, like, *beside* herself, obviously, and then they did that camera shot they do where they show the body from the knees down because they can't really show the body—I think that is the grossest, why do they do that? Just show the feet, I mean? Do they think we don't believe that somebody's dead if they don't show part of the body? I felt really sick and freaked out, so I ran back upstairs. Then my mom was knocking on my door and saying, Ashley, honey? in a tone of voice she hasn't used since I was, like, nine, but I told her to go away and she did.

Then of course Madison called and she was all, oh my God, and then Lauren called and *she* was like, oh my God. She was crying and saying how she wished she had seen Chelsey again after the party, and how weird it was that the last thing she said to Chelsey was something totally dumb like, can I borrow your coat, and she wished she'd said something else instead. After that I called Tanner because I was kind of worried about him, and he said almost the same exact thing, about how he wished he had seen Chelsey after the party and that you just never know when the last time you see someone will be. He got kind of choked up, which I thought was really touching at the time but now really pisses me off, and frankly is one of the reasons I'm here at all.

So Sunday really sucked, as you can imagine. I was laying in bed that night thinking about the report on TV and I got this really anxious feeling, like there was something that my mind was

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trying to tell me but I didn't really want to know. I know that doesn't really make sense, but that was the feeling, just really weird, like part of me was saying, think about this, and another part was saying, don't think about it, don't think about it. But I couldn't sleep so I *did* think about it, about everything I'd seen on the TV. I got this totally freaked-out feeling because I realized what I'd seen and heard earlier but had been too upset to really understand. It was two things, actually.

First, there was that interview with Chelsey's mother, who was totally crying and saying, I can't believe she's gone, her room looks like she could walk in any moment, her schoolbooks are on her desk, her purse is on her dresser, and her favorite jacket is on her chair. Because I know damn well Chelsey's favorite jacket is the green jacket that was in Tanner's Jeep and Tanner said he hadn't seen her after the party, so how did she get her coat back? But then I was like, chill out, Ashley, maybe her mom thinks a different jacket is her favorite jacket, because you never know if parents have a clue or not, you know? But the second thing was worse. I was thinking about that awful shot of Chelsey's legs and feet, how they were sort of facing down and one was kind of turned in, and just how creepy that whole thing was, and I realized, she was totally wearing the wrong shoes. She was wearing a pair of beige low-heeled sandals just like the ones Lupe bought at Wal-Mart, and Chelsey would not be caught dead—I mean, would never wear those ugly Wal-Mart shoes.

I couldn't get the jacket and the shoes out of my head. So Monday morning I went over to Chelsey's house and rang the bell, and her mom answered and she just looked like absolute shit, and I felt pretty bad myself for bothering her. But I gave her a big hug and told her how sorry I was, and then I said that Chelsey had borrowed my math homework on Friday and I needed it back, which was a total lie. Chelsey's mom sent me up to her room to get my fake homework and sure enough—there was Chelsey's green leather jacket hanging off the back of her desk chair. So then I knew that Tanner had totally lied to me, but I couldn't think why. I can't tell you why I didn't just ask him, either, except that I knew that something was way wrong with his story and I guess that made me not trust him. I left Chelsey's and went to school and Madison was all teary and upset, and so was Lauren, and Tanner looked just awful. And everyone at school was like, oh my God, you guys, we're so *sorry,* and I think some of them were but, you know, some of them totally weren't. So I basically kept to myself all day. But then, on my way to Applied Design after lunch? I came around the corner by the art rooms and there were Lauren and Tanner, hiding in this little alcove and making out big time. And I was like, oh my God. I just turned and walked away real fast, but Lauren chased after me and she was all, Ashley, Ashley, it's not what you think, we're just both so *sad.* And I go, my God, Lauren,

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Chelsey hasn't been dead a whole day, and she goes, I'm sorry, Ashley! It's not what it looks like! And I go, really? Because it looked like you had your tongue down his throat. She didn't say anything else, so I just left. "Not what it looked like"—it was *exactly* what it looked like, which was something hot and in progress, not friends comforting each other and *not* their first kiss.

After school I went home and turned on *Oprah* but I really wasn't watching it, I was kind of freaking out about Lauren and Tanner, plus I was trying not to think about the jacket and the shoes, but then Lauren called me and asked me to come over. My mom was totally hovering, which was bugging the shit out of me, so even though I was pretty pissed at Lauren, I went over. We went out by the pool to talk because Consuelo was in the kitchen, and Lauren said she wanted to explain about her and Tanner, about how they'd never done that sort of thing before, which of course was total bullshit but I didn't feel like getting into it with her so I was like, whatever. I was looking off in the other direction and I said, hey, what happened to the see-no-evil monkey? Because it was missing from the pillar. She said she banged into the pillar on Saturday night and the monkey fell off and broke into a bunch of pieces, and she knew her dad would have been totally ticked with her except that he felt bad for her because of Chelsey. I go, it's lucky the monkey didn't break the floor tiles, and she goes, yeah, that was lucky.

Right then I knew. I don't know how I did, but I did. So then I had to get out of there because I was sure I was looking at Lauren really oddly and I didn't know if I could act normal, so I just was like, whatever, Lauren, I have to go home. I could hardly sleep last night, which is, like, two nights in a row, but I decided that instead of going to school today I would come down here and ask to speak to whoever was investigating Chelsey's death. So here we are, sitting in this pea-green little room. And you've got to believe me: Even though I can't explain why I'm so sure, I think I can tell you what happened. But then you guys will have to prove it.

Here's what I think happened: Tanner stopped by Chelsey's house to give her back her jacket and one or the other of them said, let's go over to Lauren's house to swim because it's so hot. Lauren's parents weren't there, they were playing bridge at Madison's house. So then Lauren and Chelsey and Tanner were all over at Lauren's house and something happened and Chelsey caught on that Tanner was totally stepping out on her with Lauren. Maybe those two were off kissing in a corner like they did at school, I don't know. But that would *totally* piss Chelsey off, I mean she would have gone *postal* about it. Then I think she was probably screaming at them both and telling Tanner that when the school found out he cheated on the U.S. Government exam there was no *way* he would get into West Point. She probably told him that she could prove it, because she probably still had the answer key, which only

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he could have snagged from Mrs. Chelmiak's desk. And she totally would have done it, too, because she is *vicious* when she's pissed. Nice One, my ass. Then one or the other of them hit her with that stupid monkey. Because you know what? That monkey was made of stone, not cement, and if it fell off its pillar it might chip but it wouldn't break into pieces, anyone could tell you that. But it sure would have broken the tile floor, which wasn't broken at all.

I'm guessing that Chelsey came over barefoot in just her swimsuit, because that would explain why she didn't have shoes. I mean, she couldn't have had her own shoes with her, because Tanner and Lauren would have put them back on her, right? Tanner and Lauren could dress her in some of Lauren's clothes; we all dress pretty much alike so maybe no one would notice. But they couldn't dump her out with no shoes on, because then you guys would totally know she didn't get way over to the east side under her own power. The thing is, Lauren's feet are, like, three sizes bigger than Chelsey's, so none of her shoes would fit. Plus, the way Chelsey's dad was always ragging on her to set the alarm if she left the house, I bet Lauren and Tanner couldn't get back into Chelsey's house to get any shoes to put on her. But if Consuelo was as proud of her Wal-Mart shoes as Lupe was, maybe she showed them to Lauren. Chelsey has little feet like Consuelo does, and so Chelsey ends up wearing Consuelo's shoes.

So I'm totally not telling you how to do your job or anything, but I do watch *CSI,* and if I were you, here's what I'd do. The quarry? The one where the party was at? I'd look back out there for that dumb monkey, because if it's not broken, they must have ditched it somewhere. Lauren wouldn't be smart enough to think of a place and Tanner hasn't lived here long enough to know the area well. And I'd spray some of that blood-finding spray in the trunk of Lauren's BMW, because they couldn't have hauled a body around in Tanner's Jeep. You might spray that stuff around the base of that monkey pillar, too. Then check with Consuelo—I bet you a million dollars her new shoes are gone. And ask Tanner why he lied about Chelsey's jacket. That part I can't figure out, unless he just got scared and decided it would be better to act like he didn't see her that day at all. Really, all you probably have to do is tell one that the other confessed, like they do on *Law & Order.* They'll totally spit it all out—I don't think Lauren would go to prison for Tanner, and I guarantee he wouldn't go to prison for her, he's too pretty.

Anyway, I hope this helps you and that you can prove it. It feels like the least I can do for Chelsey, you know? But this isn't easy for me. Lauren and Tanner may have killed Chelsey, but I'm killing the Royals, which may not be a big deal to you, but it's a big deal to me. I mean, you don't know how vicious some girls can be, and now it will be just Madison and me against everyone else. So I really hope it's worth it, because once this gets out at school, the rest of the year is totally going to suck. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

GOODBYE, FRIENDS

by Louis Sanders

"It was better before," I thought to myself as I sat at the terrace of a café in front of Brantôme Abbey. And like all tourists, I added, "It's getting too touristy here."

Before . . . That was when I used to come and visit John and Mary, when I would spend almost all my holidays with them. Maybe six or seven years ago. Like so many English people, they'd bought a house in the southwest of France, in the Dordogne, in between Brantôme and Bourdeilles, and they'd spent years restoring it to their idea of a rural Eden.

When I talked about them, I would say rather childishly, "They're my best friends."

It was a sunny day, Friday morning; the thick heat of July slowed everything and everyone down. The French peasants with their berets and their blue jackets were the only ones who didn't seem to feel it. Mary used to love the sight of them, little clichés of the French countryside. I liked it too, I suppose that's what you do when you're a tourist, you look for more clichés, you want to see what you already know about a place. They were talking amongst themselves, both hands resting on a walking stick, or with their big bellies forward, hands in their pockets. They didn't pay attention to the people from Bordeaux, or the Parisians, or the Dutch, or the English, walking around in sandals with a container of

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cheap Bergerac wine in each hand.

There were two empty chairs in front of me, and maybe it wasn't entirely by chance. It was almost as if I were waiting for John and Mary to come and join me. I'd met John at university twenty years before; he was one of those people who can never be content with the place they're in. They can't look at a landscape without dreaming of somewhere else. And while he was admiring Brantôme Abbey on the other side of the river, or the narrow streets, paved and empty all around, he would start talking about South America, Argentina, where I'd never been and which that particular year seemed to him to be a more desirable destination than any other. A few years before he'd craved to be on a South Sea island, or in Turkey, and even before that Western Canada, just to give a few examples. Eventually Argentina had become an obsession with him and it came back into the conversation more often than any other part of the globe. Just as, in the old days, he'd become obsessed with the South of France, where he'd finally settled and which didn't interest him anymore.

I was staying in a bed-and-breakfast run by an English couple, not far from John and Mary's house, behind the cliffs along the river.

There were medieval castles perched on those enormous rocks, and each time we drove past a certain one, Mary would say: "That's the house I'd like to have." That was when we'd go and have a drink in the evening, around seven, on a little square by the château in Bourdeilles. You could have thought you were back in the 'fifties, the 'sixties, the seventeenth century, or the Middle Ages; you just had to choose where your nostalgia would take you. A French provincial village.

But John went on and on about Argentina. Even when we talked on the phone, long distance. And one day, the news stopped coming. I waited, hoping that I would get a postcard showing what had obsessed him for so long. An invitation to Argentina, or anywhere else. I had thought I was more to them than just a now useless object that had belonged to their English or Dordogne life, a piece of furniture too cumbersome to be carried around. I didn't wish them well at that moment, because I was hurt, and I must confess that I almost hoped their silence could be explained by some terrible misadventure.

I had made new friends, and for seven long years I tried to avoid going back to the Dordogne.

But every summer I would think about their garden, the taste of gin and tonic, and in winter I could just picture those log fires, I could smell the damp stones and the smoke. And I would think about all the things I missed with my new friends.

It took me a week after I arrived before I could summon up the courage to go back to the hamlet where they used to live.

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The house was empty, of course. The light-blue shutters had gone grey. The garden was overgrown, and all of Mary's efforts to recreate an English country garden full of roses had disappeared under the weeds. The metal gate had rusted and was kept closed by an enormous chain.

That's when I heard footsteps behind me. I turned round and saw a tall, rather thin man with a face like a bird's, and sad, restless eyes.

"Do you want to buy the house?" he asked in French with a strong English accent. And I answered in English.

"No, this is just, er . . . a pilgrimage."

"Really?"

"I didn't know the house was for sale."

"Well, I think it is. It's been empty a long time."

"Did you know the people who used to live here? John and Mary?"

"No, they were already gone when I settled here."

"Do you live in this hamlet?"

"The house down at the bottom, you see? With the perigordine roof."

He put his hands together to imitate a steep roof, and nodded a couple of times.

"Did you know them?" he asked.

"Yes, I used to come and visit fairly often. And then, well . . . we lost contact. Gabriel Puyjadas also knew them."

"The old man? He died."

"Oh . . . recently?"

"Two or three years ago. But I know Sue Blythe who knew them."

"Sue? I know Sue."

He introduced himself and invited me to his place to have a drink. He was called Richard Collins and came from Batley in Yorkshire. We chatted for a while, had a couple of glasses of cheap wine. When I left he shook my hand and said that we'd probably meet again at Sue's.

I went back to Brantôme to hang around, and like all the tourists I stopped in front of an estate agent's window. There was an English couple in front of me. I knew they were dreaming of living here all year round, writing books, painting pictures, wearing straw hats and flowered dresses.

That's when I saw it on the top left-hand corner of the window: John and Mary's house. And they were asking a reasonable price, too. That was yet another shock. As if I'd seen their clothes in a secondhand shop shortly after their funeral.

I walked in, trying to look wealthy enough to afford a second home in the southwest of France. As I spoke with an English

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accent, the agent had no difficulty in believing that I was more than comfortably off.

We made an appointment to go and visit the house the following day.

"Do you know the region?" he asked.

"A little."

"You'll see, it's very well situated."

I was tempted to make a sad remark, but settled for, "Is the price negotiable?"

At this stage of the proceedings, it was a stupid question, far too premature, and he gave me a puzzled look.

"You'll have to discuss it with the owner. But maybe you should wait until you've seen the house."

"Yes, of course."

It was very hot when we arrived at the gate; the light was blinding, like in a bad dream. The estate agent was talking at me, but his voice seemed to come from very far away, like an echo.

"Would you like to see the garden first?"

I said yes, but mostly to delay the moment when I would have to step into the house. I started wondering whether I would find their furniture still in place, covered with white sheets, or more likely with a thick layer of grey dust. Would I find empty glasses in the kitchen still bearing lipstick traces? The one last drink before leaving.

There was nothing left. But still I could read the signs that told me about the life of my lost friends. A dark stain on the floorboards where Mary had once dropped a bottle of wine. The grey line on the wall along the staircase leading to the rooms; it was there because John would always lean against the wall when he went upstairs. And Mary would laugh at him; call him an old man, sometimes even an old drunk. I had to smile at the recollection. And once again the agent looked at me strangely. We walked into the big room downstairs, which Mary called the sitting room. Our steps were echoing on the tiles. There were still ashes in the fireplace.

"You might have to do some work," said the agent, "but nothing much . . . it needs to be, er . . . refreshed. If you'd like to follow me, there's another room behind the kitchen."

I almost said, "I know." That was the room John called his study.

"Would you like to see the rooms upstairs?"

I was starting to have difficulty speaking. There was a lump in my throat, and I made vague noises to answer his questions. I couldn't help finding him irritating—even though I knew it was unfair—because I would have liked to be left alone.

"Do the owners live nearby?"

"Well . . . yes." I knew he was lying but I couldn't understand why.

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"Could I meet them?"

"Oh, well . . ." he said with a sly little smile and a shrug of his shoulders. "If you buy the house, you'll meet them when you sign."

And I too smiled at that moment; I could just see them walking into the lawyer's office to find me there, pen in hand, waiting to sign the deeds and to invite them to stay in their own house. But if they were in Argentina, everything would be done through the post. At least they'd see my name on the deeds.

"Have you already had an offer for this house?"

"Some Dutch people have shown some interest."

"Right."

As we walked out, we saw Richard Collins, who was waving at us.

"Do you know each other?" the agent asked.

"We've met," I said, and I could tell that he was getting more and more suspicious.

Once more Richard Collins invited me in for a drink and promised to give me a lift back to my hotel. I said goodbye to the estate agent and told him I would call the following day to put in an offer.

"Are we going to be neighbours?" Collins asked.

I could tell from the warmth of his welcome that he was a lonely man, one of those English people who live in the Dordogne all year round; they wait for summer, for visitors to turn up. They wait a lot. Then, during the summer months, they have long drunken parties until late into the night, after endless winters spent without anything to do, taking it one day at a time, fighting the boredom and the cold.

Collins seemed extremely nervous, obsequious even, as if he was worried that I would leave him to face his loneliness too soon. He worked himself up into a sort of frenzy, talking with forced gaiety, trying embarrassingly hard to establish an intimacy between us. He reminded me of those drunks in bars who treat you like a long-lost friend if you exchange a couple of words with them; who will spend a fortune buying you drinks you don't want, and who won't let you go.

He started talking about old Puyjadas. He'd probably guessed that it was a good way to catch my attention. He explained that he hadn't known John and Mary, but that Puyjadas had told him a lot about them. He was right; he got me interested, because I knew they were very fond of the old man, whom I could never quite understand, and I was curious to know what he could have said about them.

Collins offered me a gin and tonic and poured himself a generous dose of pastis diluted with water. One of those tricks alcoholics resort to, so as to drink even more. He was starting to relax.

I had no appointment, nothing to do, nobody to see, so I stayed.

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Three hours later I felt that I had drunk quite a bit too much myself. He invited me to stay for dinner. I refused but I was now dependent on him. I'd been brought there by the estate agent, who'd left long ago, and I didn't have a car to drive back to my hotel. In the course of the conversation I learned that John and Mary's furniture had been sold through a lawyer in Périgueux. He was ashamed to admit it, but he'd bought one of their prize possessions, a Clarice Cliff vase, which I remembered very well. It used to be on their mantelpiece, in the sitting room.

I turned sentimental at the sight of that thing and with the help of the gin, I started telling him about John and Mary and what they'd meant to me. Eventually I asked him if he would sell the vase back to me when I'd bought the house, so I could put it back in its place. He laughed at me for a couple of seconds and then he accepted.

It was so much like John to leave everything behind, to forget everything, down to the one and only object Mary had really loved and cherished. They would have started from scratch, over there, in Argentina; they would have acquired new furniture, they would be living amongst new colours and new designs which I couldn't even begin to imagine. They had created a world for themselves in which they needed neither their old belongings nor their old friends. I hoped secretly that Mary had protested a little, that she'd suffered a little from that decision.

Collins had helped himself to more pastis and he too was getting sentimental. He talked about his family, his nephews and his nieces, and suddenly he asked if I wouldn't mind watching the home video they'd sent him. I couldn't think of anything worse, so I reached for the gin bottle before I said, "Not at all, I'd love to." There was a whole pile of cassettes and DVDs by the television set. Most of them were of his family, he told me.

A load of fat kids in a hideous flat were saying hello to the camera. They all had pink cherubic faces, double chins, slow whiny voices, and dead eyes.

"This is my nephew Mark," said Collins; "he's very bright, you know, but they don't want to put him in a special school because . . . Oh! And this here is Bill. He's really sweet, Bill. Very musical; he plays the piano. The whole family's really musical, and here are my sister and her husband, my brother-in-law, see?"

A fat woman with thick square glasses was sitting on a sofa, leaning against a painfully thin man in a checked short-sleeved shirt. He was seriously balding, a sad little man who could have been anywhere between thirty-five and sixty-five. They both looked a little tense, self-conscious; somehow you could tell that they didn't like being filmed, even though they'd brought this torture upon themselves.

I must have fallen asleep and I suddenly felt a hand on my

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shoulder shaking me awake. I didn't know what time it was. But I guessed it was very late. Collins drove me back to the hotel even though he was terribly drunk and should never have gotten behind a wheel. The following morning I felt dreadful, but it wasn't an unusual sensation for a Dordogne holiday.

I waited until twelve and then I called Sue, hoping she would give me some information about John and Mary.

Sue invited Collins and me, as well as another character I'd never met, to her place. We very quickly got talking about John and Mary. The other guest was a Frenchman, aged about forty, who asserted that Mary had had a lot of affairs with a lot of men, himself included. He said it was just a one-night stand in his case. I refused to believe him, of course. You could tell he would have said just about anything to be the center of attention. He said that Mary had had an affair with the lawyer and then with the estate agent who'd shown me the house. He also pretended that that was the reason why John and Mary had left and that they probably didn't live together anymore. He added, with a lecherous look, that he was sorry they'd gone, especially Mary. I didn't hit him, I didn't start a brawl, but I wish I had. I hated that man, and there was no doubt that he deserved a punch in the face. Maybe I acted like a coward.

Anyway, he went on, and told us all that old Puyjadas, their neighbour, had disliked them intensely. During the last years of their stay in the Dordogne he'd made their lives a nightmare, even poisoned the dog Mary had bought, a sweet puppy she was very fond of. To get his own back, John had poisoned Puyjadas's cat, Sue's guest said. It didn't sound true. Of course not, it wasn't a bit like them. But after all, how could I be sure? Seven years ago, would I have believed anybody who told me that they'd forget me, that they'd let me down?

The Frenchman was trying to explain that you shouldn't trust the welcoming attitude of the locals; it was all superficial. It was as if he was trying to remind us that we would always remain strangers.

Collins wasn't saying anything. He was nervously biting his lip, casting glances left and right, fiddling with his fork; he didn't dare look at anybody.

The following day, I called the estate agent as soon as I woke up and put in an offer for the house. I also asked him if it was possible to borrow the key to have one last look. I wanted to know how long it would take before he would tell the owner about my offer; he simply answered: "It shouldn't be too long."

I was alone this time. I was at the door of that room; I hardly dared walk in because I knew it had been their bedroom. There was an old fashion magazine on the floor by the wall; the pages

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were all crumpled, dried out and dusty, pictures of the time when they lived here. Maybe I'd given them too much importance. Suddenly I felt stupid, worshiping these two people who hadn't even dropped me a line, a postcard. It was certainly stupid to spend all that money to buy a monument to lost friendship, a shrine without bones.

I heard footsteps below, outside, in the garden. It was broad daylight, a beautiful day, not a time for ghosts, so it didn't take much courage to go and see who was there.

It was Collins, of course, shyly looking around, turning his head left and right like a frightened bird. He gave me a large smile and waved when he saw me.

"I thought it would be you," he said. "Still on your pilgrimage?"

"It's pathetic, isn't it?"

He shrugged and leaned his head to the side.

"I know what it's like to lose people you love," he said. "I look at those films of my sister and brother-in-law. You . . . you buy houses so you can look at the walls, at the white rectangular spaces where they used to hang their pictures . . . and then you'll remember how the furniture was laid out, what went in which corner. Will you put your bed in the guest room or in their room?"

And, with a melancholy nod, he looked towards the upstairs window.

I called the agent and explained that due to unforeseen circumstances I couldn't bring back the key immediately. He would have to wait until the following day. I asked him if he'd told the owners about my offer. He knew I was lying about the key, and I could tell he was irritated; he answered rudely that he was very busy at this time of year and that he hadn't had time to talk to the owners yet.

I was determined to go back to the house that same evening, light a fire in the fireplace, maybe, even though it was the middle of summer, and sit on the floor and drink a bottle of red wine. While waiting for dark, I visited the château in Bourdeilles where I'd been with John and Mary. After that, I had dinner on my own in a luxurious restaurant near the river, in Brantôme, where they used to celebrate good news and successes. I ordered a whisky before the meal, like in the old days. I ate while looking at all the tables where we'd sat in the past.

As I was leaving, I came across Sue sitting at a table with a group of friends on the terrace of a café nearby, opposite the abbey. They had had quite a lot to drink, and they invited me to join them. It could have been a pleasant evening, if they hadn't told me that John and Mary's belongings had been auctioned in their absence, that they'd been seized by the bailiffs. Apparently they owed large sums of money to quite a lot of people. Nobody knew where they'd gone. Everybody had tried to find them, in vain. Eventually, even the house had been sold. The man who'd bought

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it, at auction, was the estate agent who'd showed it to me.

I couldn't bring myself to go inside the house and fall asleep in one of those empty rooms, on the floor, as I'd planned. I was feeling more and more uneasy about that past friendship, which was turning into an obsession. There was I in the garden with the key in my hand, about to put it in the lock, when I stopped. It was late, but I decided to go and see Collins all the same; I knew he would still be up and grateful for any company. Tonight, his friends had told me something I'd already suspected: He didn't have any set routine. He would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and go back to bed at three in the afternoon. Sometimes, he would decide to drive back to England on a whim, and stay there without getting in touch with anybody for three or four weeks. But there was nothing very surprising about that for anyone who knew the Dordogne and its exiles.

I could see him through his window in the blue glow of a television screen. He must be watching a news bulletin or the weather forecast on the BBC, thanks to satellite television.

He opened the door. He was obviously delighted to see me, but I must say that my heart sank when he declared that he'd received another video from his family, and that he had just started watching it. To get through the ordeal, I accepted the whisky he offered and didn't even say "just a little" or "a drop."

It was deadly dull, of course, and I watched without much attention, except when suddenly it struck me that the relatives on the screen were not the same as last time.

"Is this still your sister?" I asked.

"Yes, and my brother-in-law," he said, turning towards me with a beaming smile. He was obviously delighted to see that I was touched by the film.

"How many sisters have you got?"

"Just the one. Listen, listen to what the little one is about to say . . . he's so funny."

And sure enough, the kid on the screen made an inept joke. The only funny thing about him was that he didn't look at all as he'd looked in the other video. But I didn't ask questions; I wasn't interested in Collins's nephews and I didn't want to have the whole family tree explained to me.

Eventually, as I was falling asleep on the sofa, Collins told me that I could spend the night in his guest room. And I accepted gladly.

The following day, he drove me to Brantôme. I'd decided to go and drink a strong cup of coffee on the terrace, as it was Monday, and to buy the English Sunday papers which arrived a day late in the shops. I hoped that within half an hour I would find the energy to go and confront the estate agent.

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That's when I saw the photo. Collins's family. They were all there, sitting in a row on a sofa. It reminded me of the video I'd seen the night before. But the article's headline told me they were all dead, that they'd been dead for months.

Suddenly I understood why he behaved in such an eccentric manner. Even by Dordogne standards. Wasn't he doing with these films what I'd been doing trying to buy back my friends' house? He watched those films over and over again to give himself the illusion that all the dead people were still alive, even showing them to his guests and friends. The article explained that the family had all been murdered, at home, one night, by one or several men, the inquest hadn't been able to establish which. The parents had been killed first, then the murderers had stepped into the children's bedrooms.

I thought about poor Collins and the images that must haunt his worried mind. I wanted to go back and see him, ask him all sorts of questions about the people he had lost, and listen while he talked about them as if they weren't dead.

But I had something to do first. It was half-past eleven. I'd decided to go and see the estate agent to ask him why he'd lied to me, to tell him that John and Mary had been very close friends, and that I'd spent many a day in that house that I now wanted to buy. I intended to tell him that he'd been accused of having an affair with Mary, thus being partly responsible for their leaving. And what did he have to say for himself?

But I did nothing of the sort. I ordered another coffee and looked through the paper until I found the article again; I looked at Collins's family—all those people who'd been murdered in Batley. Then I folded up the paper and threw it in the first bin I found.

I took a taxi to Collins's place. I passed the château again that would send Mary dreaming of aristocratic grandeur, stone floors and cold corridors; I thought back about Collins asking me if I would use my dead friends' bedroom and his little nod towards the window.

He was both friendly and worried when he saw me. I asked him if I could come in. I put my hand on his arm, and tried to look as sympathetic as I could as I said: "I heard the terrible news."

"What? What news?"

"Your family . . . they're dead, aren't they?"

He looked me straight in the eye for a few seconds, motionless, and then he began to sob madly. He wiped his eyes, he was snivelling like a child, and he nodded frantically, repeating: "Yes, yes, they're all dead."

"I came to tell you that . . . I understand; I'm sorry. I know what it's like, and I was worried about you when I heard the news."

"How did you learn?" he asked, still sobbing away.

"In the papers. They even printed their picture."

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He was now crying on my shoulder, full of sorrow and gratitude.

I asked if he sometimes took tranquilizers. He said yes, that there was a box in his medicine cabinet. He was crushed; it was as if he didn't have the strength to be suspicious anymore. I offered to bring him a glass of water with a pill; he accepted immediately.

I went to the bathroom cabinet and found more than one box of tranquilizers; it was full of drugs of all sorts, including an impressive collection of sleeping pills. I gave him a generous whisky and a very efficient dose of sleeping pills mixed with the drink.

He calmed down almost instantly, and started to talk, telling me how much he loved his family, and how hard it is to see everything you hold dear disappear around you.

When he'd fallen asleep, his mouth gaping, I began to go through his things. I went to the cassettes and DVDs next to the television set and read their labels. Names, dates, and places. And suddenly I knew what was in all of those films: images of people who didn't exist anymore. People who'd been massacred by Collins, and whom he watched regularly while imagining that he felt love and affection for them. The two families I'd seen on the home videos were not the same. He had killed them and come back from England with their souvenirs to watch on his television screen in the Dordogne.

In the cupboard next to the television, in the middle of neat rows, I found what I was really looking for: a VHS tape bearing the title "John and Mary." I didn't have the courage to watch. They were probably there, waving to the camera at Collins's request, before he butchered them with a knife, an axe, a sledgehammer, who knows? Maybe Collins, like me, had said childishly, "They're my best friends" when he'd shown this video to some stranger or other. It wasn't by chance that he'd pointed out the right window when he was talking about John and Mary's bedroom.

While I picked up the phone to call the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital, I looked at the bottom shelves, and there I saw a tape that bore my name, made, no doubt, while I'd slept last night, a guest in his house. ●

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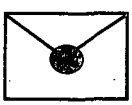

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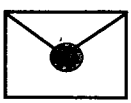

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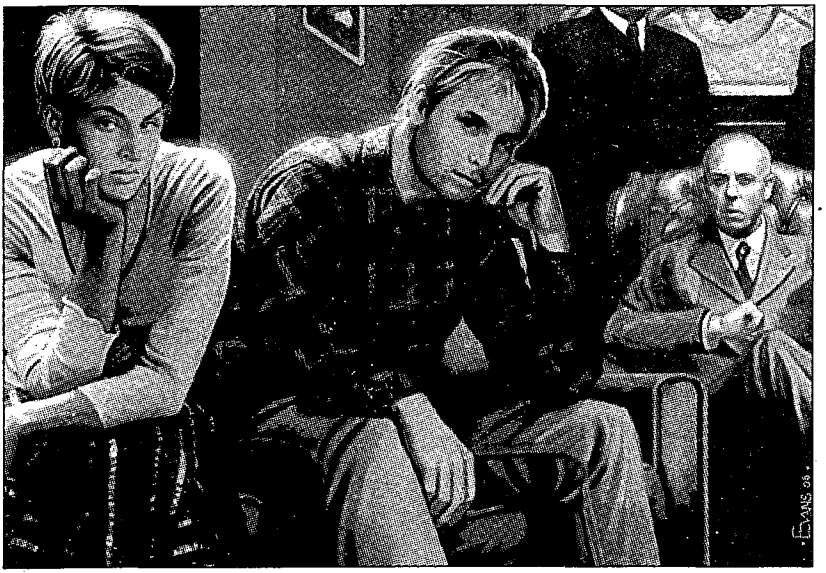

Art by Mark Evans

STONE COLD CHRISTMAS

by Doug Allyn

The limousine looked half a block long. A GM Hummer, an army assault vehicle with its sheet metal stretched to limo length. Coal-mine black with opaque windows. Bulletproof. Crude as a coffin on wheels and totally out of place rolling silently down a street where working-class folks drove pickups or econo-cars.

As the limo eased to the curb, two bodyguards scrambled out. Big men, one white, one black. Both burly, in leather car coats. No weapons showing, but they kept their hands in their pockets as they scanned the streets for trouble.

They didn't spot any. The neighborhood looked cordial as a Christmas card, Norman Rockwell-style. Two-story suburban salt-boxes decked out in their holiday best, evergreen wreaths on front doors, colored lights winking in the windows, plastic snowmen smiling on frosty lawns.

Sean crouched in the shadow of the shrouded porch swing until the two goons were satisfied the street was clear. Then one nodded to the driver, the limo's rear door popped open, and Iron Mike O'Donnell climbed out. Looked as rough as his reputation. Two

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hundred forty pounds of beef on a six-foot frame. Played center on the Northridge high-school football team, a long time back.

Twenty years older now, forty pounds heavier, Iron Mike looked like what he was, union boss of the Refuse Haulers Local 106, a radical splinter of the Teamsters. "The most dangerous labor leader since Jimmy Hoffa," according to *Newsweek*.

Surprise was his best chance, so Sean kept utterly still, waiting for Iron Mike to cross the sidewalk. As the boss's brogan touched the first step, Sean launched.

Doug Allyn has written mainly series stories for *EQMM* over the past several years. This time out he introduces an entirely new set of characters, and a plot complete with financial shenanigans, an investigation of union politics by the F.B.I., and a family's complicated loyalties. He's *EQMM*'s all-time Readers Award favorite: Since 1992, eight of his stories have taken first place.

Charging out of the shadows, he vaulted the porch railing, tackling Mike chest-high, wrestling him to the ground, the two men sprawling on the lawn as they scuffled for an advantage.

For a frozen instant the bodyguards were too stunned to react, then they seized Sean, pulling him off, pinning his arms so Iron Mike could work him over.

"You moron!" Mike said, dusting himself off. "Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

"Just wondering if you're as tough as your press releases claim."

"Too tough for you. You still tackle like a girl," Mike snorted, tousling the younger man's hair, wrapping him in a bear hug as the bodyguards exchanged puzzled glances. "It's okay, guys, it's just my half-wit brother. Been awhile, Sean."

"Not long enough. Once a year under the same roof is all my career can handle."

"Career," Mike snorted. "Sean's a banker, guys. A freakin' capitalist lackey."

"Guilty as charged," Sean admitted. "How was jail?"

"Lousy. Is that real food I smell? What's Mom cookin'?"

"Everything." Sean grinned. "Every damn thing you ever heard of. Welcome home."

Arms over each other's shoulders, the brothers led the way into the house, where their tiny silver-haired mom, in her flowered apron, with a dab of flour on the tip of her nose, greeted Mike with squeals of delight. Even their chocolate Labrador barked a hello before returning to his corner of the kitchen, patiently hoping for a handout.

After hugging her boys hello and welcoming Mike's bodyguards,

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Mrs. O'Donnell shooed the men into the dining room to the long oaken table beneath a wagon-wheel chandelier.

Iron Mike served up mugs of Irish coffee all around, then took his seat at the head of the table. And relaxed just a little. Home and free. At last.

"So, what's new, little brother?"

"You are," Sean said. "All over TV and the national press. That article in *Newsweek* said you were a Communist. I didn't even know you could spell Communist."

"I can't. I hire computer nerds like you to spell it."

"But what's the point?" Sean pressed. "Communism flopped twenty years ago, or hadn't you heard?"

"I know." Mike grinned. "Know what being a Commie amounts to these days?"

Sean shook his head.

"That's the beauty of it, laddie. Neither does anyone else. But it sounds dangerous, and in my business, making businessmen nervous is our stock in trade."

"So you're not really a Commie? Just a labor thug?"

"And you're a capitalist pig."

"Enough name-calling, boys," Mother Meg yelled from the kitchen. "No more politics at my table, I declare a truce for the holidays. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Ma," the brothers answered together.

"Are you two brothers, really?" Joe Briggs, the black bodyguard, asked, leaning back in his chair. "You don't even look alike."

True. Barrel-chested with a bullet head, Iron Mike was Black Irish, dark eyes, darker outlook. Sean was as tall as his brother but slender as a whip, fair-haired, with his mother's green eyes. Dressed preppie: fashionably faded jeans, button-down Pendleton shirt, deck shoes, no socks.

"Different fathers," Mike explained. "My dad was killed on the road when I was six. His eighteen-wheeler hit a train. After he'd been driving forty hours straight. And people wonder why I'm a Commie."

"My dad met Ma at a USO dance," Sean offered. "A soldier. Bought it in Vietnam."

"Actually, they're both adopted," their mother said, delivering steaming bowls of bean soup to the table. "Bought one from a circus, the other belongs to the milkman. I can never remember which."

"We never had a milkman, Ma," Mike said.

"The plumber, then," she said. "I've got corned-beef sandwiches coming, boys, but save some space for dessert. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Nothing for me, Ma," Sean said, rising. "I'll take Bowser for a run before dinner. If my girlfriend calls, tell her I'll be back in an hour. And for God's sake don't let these knuckleheads talk to her."

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"You invited a girlfriend for Christmas?" Mike said, surprised. "That's a first. Anything serious?"

"Might be," Sean said. "Assuming she doesn't run for her life as soon as she sees you and your goons."

"Does she play poker?"

"No, but her brother does. He's coming, too."

"Doesn't trust you two alone, huh?" Mike eyed his brother. "Don't blame him. Do I know these people?"

"No, they're business acquaintances," Sean said quickly, lacing up his running shoes and grabbing a jacket off the hook. "Back in a bit. Come on, Bowser."

The big black Lab bounded up and beat Sean out the door.

"What's little brother's new girl like, Mom?" Mike asked.

"I haven't met her yet, but I'm sure she's very nice."

"Yeah," he said thoughtfully. "If he's bringing her for Christmas, she must be."

Outside, Sean set a steady pace, enjoying the nip of the winter wind, jogging down the sidewalk as the afternoon faded and the streetlights winked on. Bowser covered twice as much ground, charging happily over lawns, pausing to water every tree, racing to catch up.

At the end of the block, Sean looked around, then veered into the city park, slowing to a walk as he spotted the car parked near the water fountains. A man and a woman climbed out, both tall, with short hairstyles. It looked better on her. She had strong Mediterranean features, handsome rather than pretty, dark eyes and deep auburn hair. Natural, not dyed.

"Agent Vanston." Sean nodded at the man. "And I take it Stretch here is supposed to pass as my lady friend?"

"I'm Agent Gia Sirico, Mr. O'Donnell," the woman said. No one offered to shake hands.

"No offense, Red, but you're not my type. I usually date petite blondes and my brother knows that."

Sirico shrugged. "For this weekend, your taste runs to Italian redheads. Unless you'd rather spend the next ten years in a cell. That's the fall for embezzlement, Mr. O'Donnell. Ten hard years."

"Call me Sean. You're supposed to be my girlfriend."

"Okay, Sean. Call me Gia, not Red. The only reds we care about are in Haulers Local 106."

"I don't like the goons in Mike's union, either. Which is the only reason I'm doing this. I didn't embezzle a dime. There must be a computer malfunction at the bank."

"No doubt," Vanston snorted. "But at the moment, your accounts are short half a mil, O'Donnell. So what will it be? A little cooperation or Christmas in jail?"

"I said I'd help you and I will. Just don't expect me to like it.

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What do I do?"

"Keep it simple," Vanston said briskly. "You introduce Gia and me as your girlfriend and her brother, Gia and Carl Moscone, and you help us to blend in."

"It may not work. My brother's no fool."

"You'd better make it work, sport. If Red Mike doesn't buy your act we'll bust you on the spot and haul you out in cuffs."

"You mean you'll try."

"Is that a threat?" Gia asked.

"More like a promise. Because if my half-brother guesses I'm selling him out, jail's the least of my worries. I won't get out of there alive. And neither will you."

By the time Sean and Bowser got back, the street was already lined with cars. Uncles, aunts, in-laws, cousins, and neighbors. Hardworking Irish-Americans coming to celebrate the holiday with their nearest and dearest and to welcome their notorious kinsman home from the lockup.

While Iron Mike basked in their affection and good wishes, Mother Meg kept the dining room table piled with finger food and sandwiches. Occasionally a man would take Mike aside for a quiet discussion—a job for a relative, a beef with a boss. No promises asked or given, but the problem was noted and a debt was incurred.

No one mentioned the labor racketeering charges Mike had been jailed for. No need. Most of the men were hard-core union. A few were old enough to remember the lead-pipe-and-dynamite days when Walter Reuther was beaten half to death by company thugs on the Miller Road overpass and old Henry Ford mounted a machine gun on his factory roof.

Bottom line, they were Irish. And knew a bit about men being imprisoned for their politics. And right or wrong, Commie or no, Iron Mike was family.

Amid the din of a dozen conversations and laughter, no one noticed the buzzer but Sean. He hurried to the door just as his mom opened it. To the FBI.

"Good evenin', welcome, and Merry Christmas to you both," Mother Meg said, ushering them in. "You must be—"

"Gia, the love of my life," Sean said, sweeping the startled agent into his arms and kissing her soundly on the mouth. And holding it as their eyes met. Hers flashed, but she held the kiss as long as he did, and gave him an extra hug when it was over.

"A girl that blushes." Mother Meg grinned. "Didn't think there were any left, let alone that Sean could find one. And you'd be the brother?"

"Yes, ma'am." Vanston nodded, shaking her hand. "Carl Moscone. Call me Carl, call me Carlo, just don't call me late for dinner."

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"Well, if you've brought an appetite you're at the right place, Carl. We've enough tucker here to feed an army."

"Or a Red Brigade," Sean said blandly. "Come on in, kids, meet the gang." He ushered the agents through the crowded living room, making introductions all the way. Ending up at the dining-room doorway where Mike was leaning against the door.

"Gia and Carl Moscone, this is my famous outlaw brother, Iron Michael O'Donnell."

"Welcome and Merry Christmas," Mike said, shaking hands with both of them. "Wow. Another rangy, redheaded beauty. Can't imagine how my brother finds them."

"I thought he preferred blondes," Gia said.

"Did Sean tell you that? If nobody's warned you yet, miss, you'd better beware of my little brother. Beneath that button-down banker's disguise, Sean's more mischief than all my rowdies put together."

"I find that hard to believe," Gia said. "Sean claims you're an evil mastermind."

"See, there he goes, fibbin' again. I'm just a humble labor negotiator, miss. And what is it you do?"

"Nothing very interesting, Mr. O'Donnell. I write advertising."

"A pity you're not in management. I wouldn't mind negotiating a deal with you myself."

"Hey, do you mind?" Sean chimed in. "This woman's going to bear my children."

"Just what the world needs, more skinflint bankers," his brother shot back. "And you, Carl? Mike said you play a little poker. We'll be puttin' a little game together later. Care to join us?"

"Love to." Vanston smiled. "Hope you don't mind losing your allowance."

"A bold talker with a beautiful sister." Mike grinned, wrapping an arm around the agent's shoulder. "This'll be a holiday to remember. Come on, Carl, let me find you a drink." Mike led him off through the crowd to the kitchen.

"Well," Gia said, taking a deep breath, glancing around to be sure they weren't overheard. "That went well. You think he suspects anything?"

"Why should he?" Sean shrugged. "He's an honest man."

"He's a Communist thug."

"Who doesn't pretend to be anything else. Which is more than I can say for either of us."

"Cool it, O'Donnell, we're not the bad guys here. I'm doing my job and you're saving your ass. If your brother's not guilty of anything, he has nothing to worry about. And by the way, don't go overboard with the kissing thing."

"Gee, Red, we're supposed to be in love and the Irish are an affectionate race. So are the Italians, come to think of it."

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"We also have a pretty good gag reflex."

"Really? Then how do you explain eels in clam sauce?"

"Ah, there you are, you two." Mama Meg came bustling up. "Gia, you and your brother are staying over, I hope."

"I'm sure they have other plans, Ma—" Sean began.

"Not at all," Gia interrupted. "We'd be delighted, Mrs. O'Donnell."

"Wonderful. Lord knows I've waited long enough for Sean to bring a girl home, but I must say it was worth the wait. What's your favorite pie, dear?"

"My fav—? Lemon meringue, but—"

"You don't say! Mine too! I know a wonderful recipe. Let's hope none of these lunkheads like it so we can eat it up ourselves."

"Please, Mrs. O'Donnell, don't go to any trouble—"

"No trouble atall, dear. I love to cook, though you'd never know from this skinny rail I've raised. Will you two be sharing Sean's old room, then?"

Gia opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again, looking to Sean for help. Didn't get any; he was all wide-eyed innocence.

"A girl that blushes," Meg repeated, shaking her head. "Who'd have thought? Never you mind, dear, we'll find you a bedroom of your own. The boys'll be playin' cards most of the night anyway."

"Thank you," Gia said, flashing a death-ray glare at Sean.

"Not a bit of it. You'd best keep this one, Sean, I like an old-fashioned girl. By the way, did you get the chance to look over that reverse mortgage I sent you?"

"Not yet, Ma. Things have been a bit . . . hectic at the bank," he said, returning Gia's glare. "I'll get to it first thing after the holidays, promise."

"All right, but one of the dates on it is in January, so—"

"Relax, Ma, I've got it covered. No more business. It's Christmas."

"You're right." Meg beamed, bustling back to the kitchen.

"If you look after your own accounts the way you see to your mom's, no wonder you're short a half million," Gia said.

"I'm not short, the computer is. And leave my mom's business out of this, okay? I thought you were here to—" He broke off, realizing their raised voices were attracting attention. "Maybe we'd better go for a walk. I'll show you the old neighborhood."

"Poker game's starting, Sean," Mike said, carrying beers back from the kitchen. "You want in?"

"Bankers can't gamble, bad for our image. Watch yourself with my brother, Carl. He's a crook."

In the street, Sean put his arm around Gia's shoulders. She tried to pull free but he pulled her closer.

"That Hummer limo parked down the street is Mike's," he murmured in her ear. "His driver's at the wheel, watching the street and watching us. Better make it look good."

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"You were supposed to help me fit in. What are we doing out here?"

"Strolling arm in arm, like the lovebirds we're supposed to be. In case you hadn't noticed, the poker game isn't co-ed. If you hang around asking questions, it'll only draw attention to the fact you're a stranger. Carl's in the game and Mike's half in the bag. If there's anything to get, your guy's in the right place."

"While we do what?"

"We could neck under a streetlight, you know, to make it look realistic."

"I'd rather walk, thank you. Where to?"

"Around the block, I guess. It's a nice neighborhood, I grew up here. Rode my bike to school, played touch football on weekends."

"And college ball at Michigan State."

He glanced at her. "You've done your homework."

"To be honest, you're a bit of a puzzle to me, Mr. O'Donnell. You and your brother, both. Your mom seems like a good person—"

"The best. Salt of the earth."

"And you grew up in a nice home, apparently didn't lack for much—"

"Except for a father. Neither of us had one for long."

"Lots of boys grow up without fathers these days. They don't all become labor racketeers . . ."

"Or crooked bankers," he finished for her.

"Exactly. Maybe you could explain that to me."

"Are you asking me to incriminate myself?"

"Your bank's computers have already done that. It's open-and-shut. The only thing that'll save you now is your cooperation. . . . What are you staring at?"

"You. Mom's right. With that snow in your hair, you're really very lovely."

"Save the snow job, O'Donnell. It won't keep me from hauling you out of your mom's house in cuffs. And by the way, you really should take a close look at that reverse mortgage she mentioned."

"No kidding? Do you guys moonlight in real-estate loans when you're not harassing innocent citizens?"

"No, but our office fields complaints, and lately a lot of them have involved reverse mortgages. Older people sign over their homes in return for a monthly payment—in effect, a mortgage in reverse. The problem's in the fine print. They think the agreement promises them payments for life, but some are strictly short-term, only a year or two. Perfectly legal, but damned unfair. Your mom—"

"Leave my mom out of this. You're not our friend. You've bullied your way into our home looking for dirt on my brother. How do you people sleep at night?"

"Not all that well, sometimes," she admitted, looking away. "You're a loan officer at the bank, right? Do you like your job, Mr. O'Donnell?"

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"Sure, for the most part. I enjoy helping people improve their lives."

"But that's not always possible, is it? You certainly can't approve every application, can you? Do you enjoy saying no?"

"Of course not. But sometimes it's necessary. Why?"

"Because there are aspects of my job I don't like either. As for your mom, I was just—"

"Butting into something that's none of your business, Agent Sirico," he said coldly, cutting her off. "A local real-estate broker wrote the agreement, I'm sure it's fine. We'd better get back. You might miss something incriminating."

The party was winding down, the last of the guests saying their goodbyes, shaking hands with one another, embracing Mama Meg, calling out "Merry Christmas" as they walked to their cars in the gently falling snow.

Inside, the poker game was well under way, men in shirtsleeves around the dining-room table, Iron Mike and his bodyguards, a city councilman, two union officers, Carl Vanston, and a reporter for the *Detroit Free Press.*

"Did you two have a nice walk?" Mama Meg called from the kitchen.

"Lovely, Ma."

"Good. Be nice to this girl, son. She's special."

Sean sighed. "You don't know the half of it."

"Special or not, it's been a long day," Gia said. "I think I'll call it a night."

"Me too," Sean said. "I'll walk you up." When they reached the top of the stairs, he said, "Your bedroom's just two doors down from mine. And since we're supposed to be lovers . . ."

"Forget it," Gia said. "What would your mother think? And just in case you sleepwalk, I sleep with a gun under my pillow."

"Sounds uncomfortable."

"It works for me. See you in the morning, O'Donnell. And not before."

"Yes, ma'am. Sleep well."

In his bedroom, Sean quickly stripped off his tie, put on a leather jacket and a black watch cap pulled down low. Raising his bedroom window, he eased out over the jamb and slid silently down the TV antenna.

Keeping to the shadows, he threaded his way through deserted backyards to a side street where a nondescript black rental waited. Beeping it open, Sean fired it up and drove sedately out onto the suburban streets, his speed well below the limit.

Across town, he pulled into a McDonald's, open twenty-four hours even on Christmas Eve. Leaving his car at the rear, he walked away, his shoulders hunched against the cold.

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Over the next six blocks the neighborhood morphed from working-class to upwardly mobile professionals, two- and three-story Dutch gabled homes with three-car garages.

Checking his Palm Pilot for the address, Sean took a quick look around, then ducked behind the garage, trotting to the backyard. With a passkey, he let himself into the rec room, then moved silently through the darkened house to the master bedroom.

Easing inside, he switched on a laser penlight and crept silently to the head of the bed. Kneeling, he played the light across the eyelids of the sleeping man until they snapped open. And widened.

"Mr. Beckham?"

"What— Who are you? How did you get in here?"

"Hush. None of that matters. Peter Beckham, I'm the Ghost of Christmas Past."

"I—I don't keep money here."

"I don't want money. All I want is a word. Say the right word and I'm gone."

"What word?"

"The password. To the computers at your realty office."

"What? I can't do that. And it wouldn't be of any use to you. There's no money there, either."

"Did I ask for money? Say the word and I will do you a tremendous favor."

"What favor?"

"Two years ago, your company started marketing reverse mortgages to elderly homeowners. Your salesmen promised lifetime payments, but that wasn't true, was it? In fact, the first of those notes will fall due in the new year, allowing your company to repossess the homes."

"Those contracts are perfectly legal," Beckham said, swallowing.

"Of course they are. It's just business, I understand that. You're entirely within your rights to seize those properties and evict the owners, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. Legally. That's why we're having this conversation."

"I—don't understand."

"Sure you do, Peter. You're a smart businessman and I'm counting on your intelligence. For example, why would I want the password?"

"Because—one of your relatives has a reverse mortgage? Look, if that's all it is, I'll cancel it! I can—"

"Not good enough. If you only change one, it'll be obvious that pressure was brought and who brought it. No, you're going to cancel them all. Every last one of them."

"Even if I wanted to, I can't do that. We sold those contracts to a—"

The short punch caught him flush on the mouth, snapping his head back against the headboard.

"Lie to me again, Pete, and it'll be the last lie you ever tell," Sean hissed. "Your company plans to develop those properties. You've

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already got financing lined up. That's why simply canceling them won't do. Your company computers are going to be hit by a virus that will find and destroy those records everywhere they've gone. During the disruption, you're going to announce a change of policy, and cancel all reverse mortgages. And in return for this gesture of goodwill, a national labor union will transfer all of its acquisition business to your office."

"A labor union," Beckham echoed through bloodied lips. "I see."

"Yes, I believe you do. What's the word?"

Beckham hesitated. "Dexter," he mumbled at last. "The password is Dexter."

"Smart move, Mr. Beckham," Sean said, rising, staring down at the rumpled realtor. "You won't regret this. Unless, of course, you're thinking 'Thank God for hard copies.' That once I'm gone, you can just call the police, report my visit, and then go ahead with the evictions. Is that what you're thinking?"

Beckham didn't answer. Which was answer enough.

"I thought you might be. But that would be a huge mistake, Mr. Beckham. Because I'm your last chance. You live in this town, you do business here. I had no trouble finding you and I'm only the Ghost of Christmas Past. The next guy who comes for you won't be a ghost. He'll turn you into one. Goodbye, Mr. Beckham."

"Wait! I gave you the wrong word! It's not Dexter, it's Rosebud."

"Yes, it is. See? I knew I could count on your intelligence. Go back to sleep, Mr. Beckham. And have a merry Christmas."

Awake at first light, Sean dressed in running togs and tiptoed down the hall to Gia's room. Listened outside her door a moment. Thought about tapping, decided against it.

Downstairs, bodies were scattered about like a battlefield. Snoring card players dozed in recliner chairs or huddled in sleeping bags in the ember glow of the fireplace. Iron Mike was curled up on the couch, snoring softly, bare shins sticking out beyond the blanket. Sean stared down at him for a moment. Mike's eyes blinked open.

He mumbled something, then coughed. "Everything okay?"

Sean nodded. "Fine. I'm going for a run. Wanna come?" But his brother was already asleep.

New snow had fallen overnight and the morning was utterly silent, no traffic, no pedestrians. Vagrant flakes drifted on the hint of a winter breeze. Sean walked half a block, stretching out, then kicked into a lope, jogging through a glistening, swirling world of white.

A dark sedan rumbled up behind him. He moved over to let it pass but it gunned ahead instead, cutting him off. Vanston leapt out in front of him, looking ragged and unshaven, a weapon at his side.

"Hold it right there," he barked. "Lean against the car,

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O'Donnell, and spread 'em. You're under arrest." Gia Sirico was out of the car now, too, circling behind his back.

"What is this?" Sean asked.

"Did you really think you'd get away with it? I played cards with those union goons for eight hours straight, watched 'em kill a fifth of scotch apiece, get so blasted they could barely see their cards. But not a slip, not a sideways glance, not a sniff of anything illegal. I could have been playing with Quakers."

"How much did they clip you for?" Sean asked.

"That's not the point! With all the hustles your brother's got going, strong-arm, extortion, racketeering, no way he'd go that long without mentioning *something*. Unless he was warned. Which cancels our deal, jerk-off. You're busted."

"For embezzlement?" Sean asked. "Actually, that's been cleared up. Our auditing division called first thing this morning. They found the problem and the missing money last night. Turned out to be a computer glitch after all. They notified your office. Have you checked your messages?"

"I told you to lean against the car."

"Screw yourself, Vanston. I cooperated with you to save myself and the bank embarrassment. But I'm not jammed up anymore. And I'm done playing. This game's over."

"I won't tell you again," Vanston snarled, raising his weapon.

"Put it away, Carl," Sirico said, snapping her cell phone closed. "I just checked my messages. He's right. He's off the hook."

"Damn it, he knew it all along. He was just jerking us around!"

"If so, he made a righteous job of it. Now put that piece away. Go home to your family. I'll finish up here."

Vanston slowly holstered his weapon, his eyes locked on Sean's the whole time. "We aren't done, O'Donnell."

"Take the car," Gia said. "Go home, get some sleep."

"You sure?"

"I'll grab a cab. I want a few words with our friend, here. With no witnesses."

"Whatever you say," Vanston growled. "See you Monday." Slamming the door, he matted the pedal and roared off.

"You're his boss?" Sean said, surprised. "I didn't realize that."

"Maybe you're not as clever as you think."

"Probably not. That 'no witnesses' business sounded ominous. Am I in trouble?"

"I haven't decided yet. I didn't sleep very well last night."

"Sorry."

"You should be. I'm good at my job, Mr. O'Donnell, and I had a gut feeling something was wrong here from the beginning."

"Like what?"

"You, mostly. I don't have any family, but the idea of a guy selling out his own brother at Christmas? That's cold. Stone-cold. Not

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that I don't run across some stone-cold types in my work; I do. But after meeting your mom, and watching you and your brother break each other's balls—"

"That's no act. We really don't get along. You think it's easy working in a bank with an albatross like Iron Mike around your neck?"

"Probably not. But he's still your brother, isn't he? And when push came to shove, I couldn't believe you'd sell him out. Maybe I didn't want to believe it. Yet you did everything we asked. Introduced us around, even conned your own mother. Stone-cold, O'Donnell. That's why I had trouble sleeping. Trying to figure out why you'd do a thing like that."

"And did you?"

"I think so. Around midnight, it dawned on me that we were here because you wanted us to be. Something was in the wind and you wanted your brother to have an ironclad alibi for it. And what could be more airtight than playing poker all night with an FBI agent?"

Sean said nothing.

"The idea bugged me so much, I went to your room to ask you about it."

"Did you? That's interesting."

"Especially since you weren't there."

"No, I meant it was interesting that you visited my room, found me gone, and didn't mention it to your partner. I'm sure he'd happily beat a confession out of me. So why didn't you tell him?"

"It's not against the law to leave your room. Even by the window. And . . ."

"And?"

She hesitated. "Maybe I owed you one. Payback. Because I didn't like crashing your Christmas party. And because you aren't quite as vile as I thought."

"That's all it was? Payback?"

She didn't answer. Which, again, was an answer of a sort. "I have to call a cab."

"Whoa up, lady. You don't get off that easy."

"What are you talking about?"

"You were right on all counts. And maybe I was a jerk for wasting your time, but I did do exactly what you asked. I got your guy close to my brother."

"After warning him."

"Wrong. I said I wouldn't warn him and I didn't. Didn't have to. That's the part you didn't get. Mike and I really are polar opposites. He'd never trust any stranger I brought home. The only stone-cold thing I did was lie to my mom. And since you forced me into that, you have to make it right."

"Really? And how would I do that?"

"My mom really likes you. If you bail out now she'll blame me

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and we'll all have a miserable holiday. So since this charade was entirely your idea, it's only fair that you see it through and pretend to like me for one more day."

"What? Of all the incredible gall—"

"I know, I've already admitted I'm a jerk. But my mom's not. And right now she's probably in there baking your favorite pie. Lemon meringue, right? Or was that a fib, too?"

"No, that part was true."

"Good. Then stay. Besides, if you hang around, maybe Iron Mike might say something incriminating."

"You think?"

"Not a chance. Mom never lets us talk shop at home. But I promise you'll have a good time anyway. What do you say?"

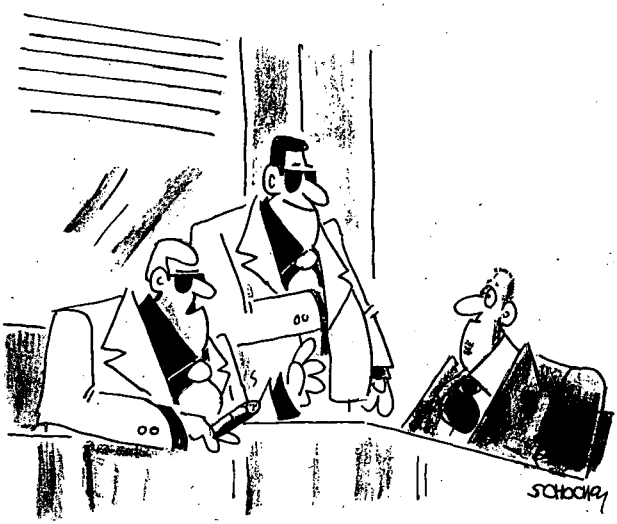
She didn't say anything. Stood there, reading him like a newspaper. So he offered her his arm. And after a moment's hesitation, she took it. And they strolled back down the glistening, picture-postcard street together.

"I like your mom's house," she said. "You really should look into that reverse mortgage business."

"No problem, I'm sure it'll work out."

"Funny, I have a feeling it already has. This pie better be really special."

"Oh, it will be. My mom's a great cook. Besides, in case you hadn't noticed, on Christmas Day everything tastes a little bit sweeter." ●



"What we offer is 'your own fault insurance.'
If anything happens to you, it's your own fault!"

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Out of Bounds

by Terry Barbieri

An assault on my back door lurches me out of a tequila-induced sleep. I pull on yesterday's jeans, stumble into the kitchen, and peer through the peephole at the rickety stairway leading to the alley below. Marble Melendez, a muscular six-one in his shorts and tank top, stops pounding. "Jason, let me in."

As I open the door, Marble sweeps past me to the darkened living room and parts the miniblinds. Stepping up beside him, I look out to see two men standing on either side of Marble's black sedan, like a freeze frame from a KGB film. Only this is El Paso, Texas, perched on the edge of the Chihuahua Desert. I doubt any KGB agent has ever set foot here.

"What's with the men in black?"

"Security guards. I've had two death threats in the last twenty-four hours."

"What happened to the bald guy?" No matter how often I visit Sidewinder, Marble's three-hundred-acre ranch, Mr. Potato Head asks to see my ID.

"Gardner? I let him go. He stole some balls I'd signed for local charities. He was auctioning them off on eBay."

I wonder how much he got. Marble's name became a household word two years ago, when he led the U.S. National Men's Team to win its first World Cup. After scoring four goals in the final game, Marble appeared on the *Today* show, *The Tonight Show,* and *David Letterman* and hosted *Saturday Night Live.* Everyone across America recognized his hazelnut skin and closely cropped curls. He received so many e-mails and letters and phone calls, he

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had to hire a secretary to answer them. Physics students clocked his balls at seventy-five miles per hour. His aim was legendary.

While Marble and I played on the same team in high school, our home lives couldn't have been more different. He lived with his Brazilian-born parents and his three brothers and sisters. An only child, I had four stepfathers in fifteen years.

In our junior year, *Sports Illustrated* named Marble America's most promising teenage athlete. While he kicked his way into the spotlight, I retreated into the shadows. I dropped out of high school and took a job in construction to escape my most abusive stepfather to date. I spent my nights on eBay, bidding on an increasingly sophisticated array of spy ware, until I was ready to start my own detective agency. Jason Lightfoot, Private Eye.

Half a dozen cars pull up behind the sedan and reporters pour out. One aims a telephoto lens at my window. Marble releases the blinds and the slats snap into place. "They've been following me day and night. There are so many of them camped outside my ranch, it's starting to look like Woodstock."

I'm not surprised. Two days ago, an eighteen-year-old girl filed a lawsuit claiming Marble had seduced her three years earlier, when she visited his ranch. Last night the comedians who had once hosted Marble on their talk shows opened with monologues about him playing out of bounds, committing fouls with his hands, and scoring illegal goals.

I shove aside the change, keys, cell phone, and Beretta cluttering my dining table, turn on the overhead light, and pour two shots of Cuervo Gold. Taking a seat, Marble draws an eight-by-ten out of an envelope and slides it towards me. I study the photo of him standing behind the dozen foster children he had invited to Sidewinder.

"Which one is she?"

He points to a teenage girl with long blond hair whose pursed lips refuse to smile for the camera. Her eyes burn with the intensity of a child who has seen too much in too few years.

"What happened?"

"I was taking a walk late one night and found her on the path leading to the creek. She was supposed to leave the next morning and she said she couldn't sleep. She told me Sidewinder was the first place she'd been able to breathe since the state had removed her from her mother and started placing her in foster homes."

"Sounds like she wanted you to adopt her."

"A bachelor in his twenties doesn't adopt a teenage girl. I didn't know what to say. I took her hand as we skidded down the bank. She was wearing flip-flops, which was stupid; there are snakes and scorpions everywhere out there. We froze as a couple of deer stepped out of the brush. Standing there, watching them drink, Lindsey looked like a little girl. Without thinking, I leaned down

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and kissed the top of her head. I knew I'd made a mistake when she raised her face towards mine. I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to embarrass her. I took a step back and told her, 'Lindsey, we can't.' She wouldn't speak to me after that. All the way back to the house, she didn't say a word.

"I need your help, Jason. I've been suspended from the team, the National Soccer Hall of Fame has removed my uniform from its exhibit, and three companies have cancelled my endorsements. At the rate I'm going, I'll have to borrow money to pay my attorney. I need you to investigate who's behind this, who's coaching her. She doesn't have any family."

According to Marble's lawyer, Lindsey Stillwell works at a twenty-four-hour diner called the Wagon Wheel. The night after Marble's visit, I park my van outside a piercing parlor and walk over to the diner. An ageing Asian janitor, seated at the counter, leafs through a leftover newspaper, while a teenage boy and girl share a sundae in a corner booth.

I take a table by the window. A few minutes later, Lindsey approaches. She's aged since the photo taken at Sidewinder. She's taller now and her black mascara clashes with her pale complexion, like a pencil sketch in which the artist has inked in only the eyes.

"Know what you want?"

I think of a few things that aren't on the menu. "Two eggs, over easy, and a coffee."

When she brings my coffee, I ask if she has a cell phone. "You need to make a call?"

"No, I was expecting one and I'm not sure this thing is working." I hold up my phone. "I was wondering if you could call my number."

She shrugs, pulls a phone from her pocket, and keys in my number as I recite it.

Seconds later my phone rings. "Hello."

"Can I get you anything else?"

"No, thanks."

Our eyes meet as we hang up.

I'm halfway through my coffee when she returns with my eggs. As soon as I've finished eating, I leave her a generous tip and head back to my van. I remove my cell-phone interceptor from the glove compartment, look up Lindsey's number on my cell-phone log, and key it into the interceptor. It will now pick up any calls Lindsey makes or receives within a ten-mile radius.

On my way home, I cruise past Lindsey's home address. What I'd assumed was an apartment number turns out to be a room number at the Sandstorm Motel. The parking lot looks like someone has taken a sledgehammer to it. A battered marquee adver-

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tises Rooms by the Month. So this is where Lindsey lives, or rather, sleeps. My guess is that life is something she's still looking forward to.

The next day I set up shop in a parking garage five blocks from the Sandstorm. The protection it offers from the midday sun is worth the four bucks a day, which I'll charge to Marble anyway. Late in the afternoon, my palm-size interceptor picks up its first call.

I press Record as Lindsey answers. "Hello."

"How's the diary coming?" A man. White. Middle-aged.

"I just have a couple of entries to go."

"I talked to *Behind the Scenes.* They've scheduled your interview for next week, but they want to see the diary first. If Marble touched you outside your shirt, your story's worth fifty thousand. If he put his hand inside your shirt, it jumps to seventy-five. If he unzipped your jeans . . ."

"He didn't."

"That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The point is, I found you sleeping in Mission Park, surrounded by winos and crack addicts. You looked twenty years older than the girl who visited Sidewinder."

"So this is about paying you back."

"It's about us helping each other. Marble is sure to settle out of court. Do you think he really cared about you or any of those other kids he invited to his ranch? It was all a publicity stunt. And if he'd cared enough to pay his staff a decent wage, I wouldn't have hocked his damn balls."

Gardner.

"When do you need the diary?"

"By Sunday. I want to read it before I turn it over to *Behind the Scenes.*"

I pop open a Coke. So do I.

The following day I stuff my Beretta, my camera, my wallet, and my phone interceptor into my pockets, grab a basket of towels, and drive over to the Laundromat facing the Sandstorm. Breathing in a haze of detergent, I throw my towels into a machine and take a seat by the grimy front window.

I'm running my towels through a third wash cycle when Lindsey, wearing a sleeveless shirt and shorts, steps out of the motel. I watch her head down the street, a small leather bag swinging from her shoulder.

As soon as she's out of sight, I cross the street and enter the Sandstorm. The desk clerk is on the phone, talking ninety miles an hour about her husband who arrived home at two that morn-

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ing. She ignores me as I cross the lobby, enter the musty hallway, and board the elevator which groans in protest as it carries me to the second floor.

It takes me less than a minute to pick Lindsey's lock. I take in the neatly made bed, the *People* magazine, and the pastel bras and panties hanging over the radiator.

In a bureau drawer, beneath a couple of tank tops, I find a cloth-bound book. Its entries, dated three years ago, describe Lindsey's stay at Sidewinder. The evenings spent playing video games and eating popcorn and watching DVDs on Marble's large-screen TV. Marble barbequing burgers. Bats swooping down at dusk to sip water from the pool.

I flip forward to the most recent entry.

Late last night I slipped out the back door and followed a dirt path towards the creek. I'd almost reached the water when I heard someone behind me. It was Marble.

I told him I couldn't sleep. I told him how, in my foster home, I share a room with three girls, how one of them throws up in our bathroom after every meal, how there are no locks on any of the doors, and how the boys sometimes steal peeks at us when we're showering. Looking out at the wide, empty desert, I told him, "I'd give anything not to go back there."

"Maybe we can work something out," he said.

He took my hand and helped me down the bank. Then he asked, "Have you ever been alone with a boy? I mean, really alone?"

The writing ends here. I use the TV remote control and my phone interceptor to hold open the diary's facing pages so that I can photograph them.

I've shot three pairs of pages when my interceptor picks up a call. I glance out the window to see Lindsey standing in the parking lot, her phone pressed to her ear.

A man answers. "Hello."

"There's someone in my room."

"Where are you?"

"Outside the motel."

"I'm on South Main. Keep an eye on the entrance; I'll be right there."

I shove my camera and interceptor into my pocket, hurry past the elevator to the stairwell, and take the stairs two at a time. The warped door at the bottom won't budge. I slam my shoulder against it. On the third blow, it bursts open. I race down the hall and duck out the emergency exit, setting off an alarm.

A ten-foot brick wall separates the back of the Sandstorm from the upscale houses behind it. A chain-link fence topped with barbed wire surrounds the lumberyard to my left. My only hope is the alley running behind the strip shopping center to my right. I

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race towards it. As I reach the corner of the motel, I nearly collide with Gardner. He stumbles as I swerve past him, regains his footing, and tackles me from behind. He twists my left arm behind my back as he slams me against the ground. The asphalt burns a skid mark across my cheek.

Gardner pulls my Beretta from my front pocket and presses it to my skull. With my face mashed against the ground, bits of gravel imbedded in it, I don't see Lindsey, but I hear her running towards us.

Gardner backs off. "Stand up."

I stumble to my feet and he orders Lindsey to check my pockets. Her slender fingers extract my keys, my wallet, my camera, and my phone interceptor. She hands them to Gardner, who examines the interceptor and presses Play.

"How's the diary coming?"

"I just have a couple of entries to go."

He tosses his keys to Lindsey. "Get my car."

She disappears. Two minutes later she rounds the corner in a white Buick and pulls up beside us.

Gardner opens the trunk. "Get in."

As I push aside the jumper cables, I consider grabbing the tire iron and taking a swing, but I'm pretty sure Gardner would fire faster than I could bash in his skull. I fold myself into the trunk, which smells of stale marijuana and motor oil. Its worn carpet feels like it's full of sand fleas.

Gardner slams the trunk, plunging me into darkness. Moments later the Buick backs up, turns, and lurches forward. As we pull out of the parking lot, the trunk heats up faster than an oven set on broil. Sweat trickles into my eyes, soaks through my shirt, my jeans, my underclothes. By the time we've put the stop-and-go traffic of the city behind us and hit the open road, the air has grown so thick I can hardly breathe.

I run my hand along the side of the trunk until I find the wires leading to the brake lights. Making a fist, I punch them out. Air and light stream in.

Through my peephole, I watch the asphalt unwind behind us. Eventually we turn onto a steep dirt road. Or maybe it's a driveway. Rocks and ruts scramble my insides as we bounce over them.

When the ground finally levels out, we stop. I glimpse Gardner's legs as he approaches the trunk and tells Lindsey, "I'm heading back to town for some Xanax and this guy's vehicle. We've got to make it look like an accident."

I think about the local canyons. Is he planning to drug me, strap me into my own driver's seat, and send me flying? I tell myself it will take him all day to match my key to my van. Then I remember my proof of insurance, folded inside my wallet. If Gardner sees that, he'll know the make and model and will be back in no time.

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The trunk pops open. The sunlight is so bright it bleaches the color out of the sky.

"Get out."

Stiff as a prizefighter who's gone one round too many, I straighten my arms and legs and climb out of the trunk. The sweat around my mouth instantly evaporates, leaving behind a thin crust of salt.

I look around but have no idea where we are. A ranch house overlooks the driveway. Three horses, in the pasture to our right, crowd beneath the shade of a single cottonwood tree. The desert stretches for miles in all directions.

"Let's go." Gardner waves my gun towards a wooden shed, unlocks it, and escorts Lindsey and me inside. Clay pots, a wheelbarrow, and collapsed lawn chairs crowd the windowless interior. Gardner hands Lindsey my gun, takes an extension cord from the wall, and binds my wrists so tightly behind my back, I fear my shoulders will pop out of their sockets. Then he turns over a bucket, orders me to sit down, and ties my ankles together with twine.

He takes the gun from Lindsey. "I'll be back."

She waits until his car has pulled out of the driveway before she tries the door. It's locked.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"A ranch Gardner takes care of. The owners live in Dallas."

"If you untie me, I can get us out of here. You don't think I'm the only one who's going to suffer an accident."

She stares at me, her eyes two smoldering coals unearthed from the ashes of an abandoned fire. "Gardner wouldn't kill me. He needs me."

"All he needs is your story. Think about it. He'll plant your diary in my apartment and tear out the blank pages to make it look like someone else got to it first. He'll tell the tabloids that you and I were lovers, that I talked you into suing Marble, and that we offered him a cut if he testified that he saw Marble touching you. The story will be worth more with you dead than alive, especially if he hints that Marble was behind our accident."

Lindsey frowns, looks around, then unties my wrists. The blood stings as it rushes back into my hands. As I rub my wrists, she kneels down in front of me and struggles with the knot that binds my ankles.

"There's a pair of pruning sheers on that wall."

She retrieves them and cuts through the twine.

"Where are we?" I ask again. "What road?"

"We took 54 out of El Paso, then we turned onto a side road."

"Marble lives off 54. How far are we from Sidewinder?"

"I don't know. I haven't been there since I was a kid." She makes it sound like it was ten years ago instead of three.

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"Do you have your cell phone?"

She pulls it from her pocket and hands it to me. I dial Marble's number, get his voice mail, and leave a message. Then I remove an axe from the wall. "Stand back."

I swing at the wall and the wood splinters as the head of the axe imbeds itself in one board. I yank it out and swing again. The board cracks in half.

Three minutes later, I've created a gap large enough for us to slip through sideways. We climb out, scan the horizon, and hike downhill.

The afternoon sun casts a watery mirage on the asphalt. We keep our distance from the road. If Gardner returns, the occasional cactus won't provide us with much cover.

We've walked a couple of miles before we spy a marker: Route 117. As we pass a fenced goat pasture, Lindsey's phone rings.

I recognize the number. "Marble, it's Jason. Are you home?"

"What's wrong?"

I tell him how Gardner caught me spying on Lindsey, how he forced me into his trunk, how he locked Lindsey and me in the shed, and how we escaped.

"Where are you now?"

"Route 117, off 54. We're outside a small ranch. There's a beige trailer set back from the road and a goat pasture with a lean-to in the middle."

"Stay there. I'll come get you."

I hand the phone to Lindsey. "He's coming."

I notice that her cheeks have turned a painful shade of pink. "Let's get out of the sun."

We walk towards the pasture, lie flat on our stomachs, and drag ourselves beneath the barbed-wire fence. The goats scatter as we scramble to our feet and approach their water trough. I turn on the faucet and pass one finger through a stream of scalding water. I give it a minute, then test it again. "Go ahead."

Lindsey bends down, twists her head, and drinks, oblivious to the water streaming sideways off her face. When she's done, I take a drink myself. Then we duck inside the lean-to. Lindsey leans her head against one post and closes her eyes.

Fifteen minutes later, we hear a car approaching. Lindsey's eyes snap open. "Marble?"

I peer out and spy my own van cresting the hill. "Gardner."

We press ourselves against the back of the lean-to. Instead of passing us, the van stops. How could Gardner possibly know we're there? Then I remember that he took my interceptor, still programmed with Lindsey's number. He must have picked up Marble's call.

I yank Lindsey's hand. "Let's go."

The driver's door slams as we run towards the back of the pas-

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ture. This time we drag ourselves too quickly beneath the fence. Lindsey cries out as a barb draws a bloody line along the back of her left calf. The fence tears my shirt, punctures my right shoulder.

Lindsey's leg leaves a thin trail of blood as we free ourselves and race towards the trailer. Gardner has already circled the pasture. Sunlight reflects off my gun, clutched in his right hand.

We keep running as he fires the first shot. An explosion of dirt marks the bullet's landing. The next shot strikes even closer.

"I can't," Lindsey pants. She stops, raises her hands, and turns to face Gardner.

Blood runs from her wound. I can't leave her. I raise my hands and turn around too.

As Gardner takes a step towards us, Marble's Jaguar convertible appears at the top of the hill.

"Distract him," I whisper.

Lindsey leans her weight on her good leg. "I'm hurt."

Gardner squints. "What the hell are you doing?"

"He had a knife hidden in his boot. He worked his way loose. He forced me to go with him."

Gardner doesn't look convinced.

Marble's car purrs to a stop.

"Listen," I step forward, hands still in the air. "Let me join your side. I can tell the lawyers about the times I've seen Marble with his hands up girls' shirts. How he invites foster kids to his ranch and pretends to love them the way their parents never did. Just give me a small cut."

As I speak, Marble climbs out of the car, a soccer ball in one hand, and approaches Gardner from behind. He drop-kicks the ball. With a loud thump, it strikes the back of Gardner's head. He sways forward and drops my Beretta as he crumples to the ground.

I grab my gun, then step back as Marble turns Gardner over. He's out cold, but he's breathing.

Marble calls 911. As soon as he's done, he turns to Lindsey. "Are you okay?"

She nods.

"We've got to do something about that leg." He helps her to his car, opens his trunk, and pulls out a white towel and a shin pad. He folds the towel, places it over her cut, then puts the shin pad on backwards to hold it in place. I feel a twinge of envy as Lindsey climbs into the front seat and Marble slides in beside her.

Ten minutes later the police arrive, followed by an ambulance. The medics offer Lindsey a ride to the hospital, but Marble tells them he'll take her. After taking our statements, the cops tell me, "We'll have to impound your van. It's evidence."

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What can I do? I climb into the back of the Jaguar. Lindsey's hair whips at my face as Marble drives us into town.

Marble and I sit beside Lindsey in the emergency room while she fills out a stack of forms. After she's turned them in, Marble asks her, "Why did you spread all those lies about me?"

"You made me believe that you cared about me, then you abandoned me. That night you took my hand was the first time I'd let anyone touch me in years, since my stepfather . . . " She looks down at the scuffed linoleum. "He's the reason they placed me in foster homes. I begged my mother to leave him, but she wouldn't."

I recall the times I asked my mother to leave the stepfathers who abused me. In the end, I was the one who had to go.

Lindsey looks at Marble. "Do you know what it's like to live with people who don't care about you? People the state pays to house you? Before I visited Sidewinder, I could stand my life. I didn't know any better. But afterwards the foster world was like this huge weight holding me down. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. Some mornings I couldn't get out of bed at all. I wrote to you every day for three months. I stole stamps from my foster mother's purse so I could mail them, but you never wrote back."

"I'm sorry."

"After I finished high school, I had nowhere to go. Gardner found me living in Mission Park. He got me a room and helped me find a job. When he suggested the lawsuit, I felt like I owed him and I figured you had so much money, you'd settle out of court and never miss it."

Marble looks at her. "Do you have any idea how much damage you've caused? My team's suspended me, my endorsements have been cancelled, and my own sister won't let me take my niece to the zoo."

A woman opens the door at the back of the waiting room. "Lindsey Stillwell."

Lindsey rises and limps towards her. Marble and I stay behind.

Marble and I are drinking Balkan beer in his vaulted living room when his picture appears on the ten o'clock news. Marble turns up the volume. *In a strange twist of events today, Marble Melendez's ex-security guard, Phillip Gardner, allegedly abducted Lindsey Stillwell and her companion Jason Lightfoot.*

I choke on my beer. "Companion?"

The two of them escaped and Stillwell was treated for minor injuries at St. Luke's Hospital. Stillwell recently filed a lawsuit against Melendez claiming that he had seduced her when she visited his ranch three years ago, at age fifteen. This afternoon Stillwell reported that she is withdrawing that suit.

Lindsey, standing outside St. Luke's, answers a reporter's ques-

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tions. *"The lawsuit was Gardner's idea. He twisted my memories of a gentle, caring man into something ugly. After Jason talked me out of filing the lawsuit, Gardner went crazy."*

I put down my beer. "I need something stronger."

Marble pours me a double shot of mescal.

I spend the next two nights at Sidewinder. On the third day, the police release my van. When I pull up in front of my apartment, I wonder whether there's been a murder. Reporters, photographers, and cameramen mob the sidewalk. The moment I climb out, they surround me.

"How long have you and Lindsey Stillwell been lovers?"

"Is it true that you and Marble played on the same team in high school?"

"Did Marble ask you to date Lindsey so you could talk her out of the lawsuit?"

Before I can speak, Marble's sedan skids to a stop in the middle of the street. He opens the rear door. "Jason!"

I shove my way through the reporters and climb into the back. "What the hell is going on?"

"Lindsey was on *Good Morning America*. She's sold the movie rights to her story for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Her story?"

"Growing up in foster care, her life on the streets, how you two met, the kidnapping." He pauses, then asks, "Did you sleep with her?"

"No."

I imagine what it would have been like if I had. As we reach Highway 54 and put El Paso behind us, I think out loud. "I guess she got what she wanted in the end, a nice fat check and lots of attention to make up for being ignored as a child. I just wish she wouldn't share all that attention with me."

Marble leans back in his seat. "Welcome to the club."

"What club?"

"The club where delicate young women prey on strong, virile men."

"And truth is auctioned off to the highest bidder?"

"Some days I think the world is turning into one big reality show." He leans forward and tells the driver to floor it.

I glance over my shoulder at the van that's tailing us. A man hangs out the window and aims his camera at the back of our sedan as we pick up speed and zoom off into the desert. ●

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Careers

by Barbara Mayor

Carrie had a quirky vice.
She dearly loved to steal.
It helped her insecurity.
It made her feel more real.

It calmed her when she felt too fat,
or in-between or thin.
It soothed her when her hair hung long
or zits attacked her skin.

At first she took just petty things.
But soon she gathered more,
from cars to clothes to furniture,
and finally the store.

It got so bad that everyone
could recognize her face.
They barred her from the baseball game
for fear she'd steal third base.

When fame grows so gigantic,
it's time to change one's vice—
to burgle, forge or Enron,
or something not as nice.

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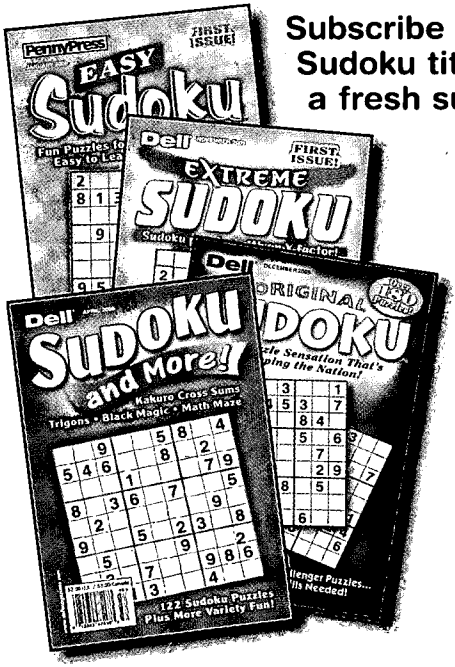

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